

Low-income families strained by distance learning

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

When the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools across the country in March, districts turned to emergency online instruction, distributing tens of thousands of internet hot spots and learning devices like laptops and tablets.

But a new survey of low-income families in Los Angeles shows that many students became disengaged, especially when home technology was lacking or wasn't reliable. The research shows that continued school support for [internet access](#) and devices—as well as live instruction and teacher feedback—will be critical for improving remote learning for the remainder of the 2020-21 [school year](#).

"If we want the future of Los Angeles to be less characterized by profound inequality, we must do more to guarantee high quality learning opportunities for all children," said Pedro A. Noguera, dean of USC Rossier. "This report reminds us of how far we must go to deliver a well-rounded education."

The report shows the many ways in which the pandemic is making it difficult for schools to provide high-quality learning opportunities for all children. For example, many models of remote instruction rely at least in part on parents-as-educators, when in fact many parents—especially low-income parents—are required to work outside the home or have limited technological proficiency to support students' distance learning needs. And only about one in three families report that students always have a place free of distraction for remote learning.

"Every room in the household is now a classroom," said Stephen J. Aguilar, an assistant professor of education at the USC Rossier School of Education. "Bedrooms, living rooms and kitchens are not set up for uninterrupted, focused instruction. At the same time, these familial, home-based spaces allow multiple generations of learners to help each other work through challenges caused by technical issues that include a lack of reliable, high-speed connectivity and a shortage of devices."

Aguilar produced the report with Hernan Galperin, an associate professor of communication at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.

"We have long been aware that differences in digital readiness at home can affect [school](#) performance. But since spring of 2020, what was a long-simmering problem became an emergency," Galperin said. "Our findings show that students without appropriate connectivity or devices for distance learning are less motivated and are able to complete fewer assignments than their peers. If schools are expected to contribute to social mobility and create lifelong opportunities for all children, there needs to be a concerted effort at the federal, state and local level to address these disparities."

Other findings included:

- Families have made great sacrifices to invest in digital infrastructure, with highest spending on fixed internet followed by laptops and computers.
- The majority of parents surveyed have limited experience with computing devices, reducing their ability to help solve [technical issues](#).
- Digital readiness at home is key to supporting live instruction models, which in turn affect schoolwork completion and student motivation.
- Older siblings and other [family members](#) play a key support role for students struggling with remote learning

The survey was conducted online and by phone, and sampled 1,971 families with children in K-12 schools administered by the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, Vaughn Schools Charter Schools and STEM-Prep Charter Schools. The California-based nonprofit Great Public Schools Now provided funding for the study.

More information: When school comes home: How low-income families are adapting to distance learning. rossier.usc.edu/files/2020/10/...mes-Home-Aguilar.pdf

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