

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-564](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

School-age children without internet access may have difficulty in completing homework. Those without in-home fixed access may go online wirelessly outside the home to do homework. A provision was included in statute for GAO to review wireless internet access for school-age children in lower-income households.

This report examines (1) challenges lower-income school-age children who lack in-home fixed internet face in doing homework involving internet access, and (2) selected school district efforts to expand wireless access for students and the federal role in those efforts. GAO analyzed 2017 CPS data; reviewed six local projects that were selected based in part on education industry stakeholders' recommendations, that included a range of geographic locations, and that took steps to address the homework gap; compared FCC efforts to federal standards for internal controls and pilot-program design best practices; reviewed FCC and Department of Education documents; and interviewed 17 stakeholders, including school districts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FCC take steps to assess and publish the potential benefits, costs, and challenges of making off-premises wireless access eligible for E-rate support.

FCC agreed with GAO's recommendation.

View [GAO-19-564](#). For more information, contact Andrew Von Ah at (202) 512-2834 or vonaha@gao.gov.

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WIRELESS INTERNET

FCC Should Assess Making Off-School-Premises Access Eligible for Additional Federal Support

What GAO Found

According to GAO's analysis of 2017 Census Bureau Current Population Survey (CPS) data, children ages 6 to 17 in lower-income households are more likely than peers in higher-income households to lack high-speed in-home internet and rely on mobile wireless service. GAO found that students who use mobile wireless for homework may face challenges, including slower speeds and limitations smartphones present in completing tasks like typing papers. These "underconnected" students may seek out ways to access wireless internet outside of the home to do homework; however, these methods also pose challenges (see figure). The inequity in internet access—and therefore in the ease of doing homework involving access—between students of varying income levels is known as the "homework gap."

Challenges to Methods School-Aged Children (6–17) May Use to Access Wireless Internet outside the Home to Do Homework

Potential options for accessing fixed wireless internet outside of the home	Challenges						
	May require transportation to/from home	May not be safe	Public Wi-Fi may pose cybersecurity threats	May have limited hours	Location may offer computer/device, but they may not be available	May require student making purchase	May be outside, exposed to weather
Library	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Community center	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Business such as coffee shop	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Use school's Wi-Fi after hours outside of building	✓	✓					✓

Source: GAO analysis of literature and interviews with education industry stakeholders. | GAO-19-564

Efforts by six selected projects involving seven school districts expanding wireless access for students who may lack it at home varied. According to officials with most school district projects GAO reviewed, rules for the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) E-rate program, which allows schools to purchase discounted internet equipment, may limit schools' ability to provide wireless access off-premises. Specifically, off-premises access is not eligible for E-rate support, and schools that provide such access using existing services supported by E-rate must reduce their E-rate discounts. FCC conducted a pilot project in 2011 and 2012 to help decide whether to make wireless off-premises access eligible for E-rate support, but FCC did not determine and execute a methodology to assess the potential costs, benefits, and challenges of doing so. In 2016, FCC received two requests from school districts seeking waivers of rules to allow them to use E-rate program support to provide off-premises access, but FCC has not made a decision on the waivers. Determining and executing a methodology to analyze data about the potential benefits, costs, and challenges of easing E-rate rules on off-premises use and publishing the results could provide transparency to stakeholders such as school districts. This step could also help FCC act on pending and future waiver-of-rule requests and broader changes to rules that may help schools address the homework gap.