



## Head Start's Remote Learning Technology Gap

Lack of Resources Threatens to Leave America's At-Risk Children Further Behind

The **National Head Start Association's** mission is to coalesce, inspire, and support the Head Start field as a leader in early childhood development and education. As advocates working on behalf of the Head Start children, families, and programs, NHSA works diligently for policy and institutional changes that ensure all vulnerable children and families have what they need to succeed.

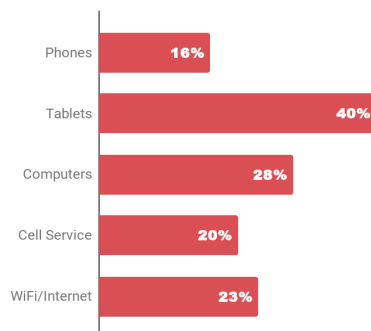
The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption in services for Head Start children and families. In the CARES Act, Head Start received \$750 million to support the immediate needs of programs, largely sanitation costs and providing the means to make up for lost learning time for some children. However, the needs of Head Start children, families, and staff have continued to evolve as the pandemic's impact in local communities has taken shape, and needs concerning technology have quickly become paramount.

Reports from providers indicate substantial technology is needed to enable staff to provide remote services and concurrently create access to remote services for low-income families enrolled in Head Start. Such an investment would yield exponential benefits, creating continuity in services to caregivers and ensuring children are prepared to succeed in school and in life.

## Staff Lack the Technology Needed to Optimally Support Families

Throughout the pandemic, Head Start staff have remained employed (at [the direction](#) of the federal Office of Head Start), working to maximize the services provided to families remotely. These services have proven critical, as many programs quickly adapted to support families' basic needs, delivering food, baby formula, and diapers, while simultaneously working to support children's academic development with at-home activities, virtual classrooms, and caregiver engagement.

### STAFF WITHOUT ACCESS



**28%**

of Head Start staff lack access to a computer

In doing this work, technology has become the core delivery mechanism for educational services to the at-risk population enrolled in Head Start, and at the same time, Head Start program staff often lack the resources necessary to support their work. Many are working on phones or iPads but need additional technology to maximize the remote services provided to families.

A recent quantitative survey of the Head Start field further elucidates these technology needs. An astounding one in four staff lack access to a computer, one in five lack access to cell service, and one in four do not have adequate internet access to perform their job duties, despite each of these playing a critical role in effectively supporting children and families. **When the survey is scaled based on program enrollment, the results indicate that more than 60,000 Head Start staff lack adequate access to the internet, and more than 40,000 phones are needed.**

In order to target technology for Head Start staff providing services to families, there would be one-time costs in purchasing technology and limited recurring costs in mobile hotspot subscriptions for a smaller subset of staff. **Laptops or tablets, along with hotspots for staff with inadequate access to broadband would cost \$102 million.** Funding and resources to answer staff technology needs, even in part, would yield exponential benefit to the families served by these clearly under-resourced staff.

## Families' Lack of Access to Technology Compromises Child Learning & Development

Many children and families that Head Start serves do not have access to what is necessary to receive services in a remote setting: lack of access to internet, hardware, and software equate to missed learning time for children who cannot afford the technology that is relied on in remote service delivery. Among the at-risk Head Start population, lack of access to basic technology threatens to widen gaps in remote service delivery, leaving many of our most vulnerable children unable to receive services and at greater risk of falling farther behind their peers.

To mitigate the far-reaching effects of the looming academic regression of Head Start children, local programs are working in overdrive to ensure that all Head Start children have access to consistent, uninterrupted learning experiences that will enable them to arrive at kindergarten ready to succeed. Staff work to drop off supplies and packets of activities, but children without adequate access to broadband or unlimited data have largely lost their ability to interact with their peers. While other children join virtual circle time with their teachers and classmates, have one-on-one time with program staff, and receive tele-mental health services, the children without technology access fewer services and become more isolated over time.

The recent quantitative survey of Head Start programs found that approximately 22% of families, or 192,619 families, do not have access to a phone for remote learning and engagement. For Head Start families, 28% lack access to cell service and 40% lack access to WiFi, creating additional detrimental barriers to staying connected to Head Start programs that are able to support their school readiness and child development goals. Lack of access to a reliable connected device or adequate broadband isolates at-risk families and creates insurmountable barriers in providing equitable access to remote services.

While Head Start leads the early childhood sector in multigenerational support and high-quality learning, establishing technology infrastructure and adaptive software are not core Head Start strengths. Organizations like the nonprofit organization Waterford.org, a national technology leader in helping families prepare their children for school, specialize in establishing internet access, procuring hardware, and providing enriching academic material to children and families, including some in Head Start.



We would love to ensure that all of our families have the technology access they need to have access to all we are offering.

- **Barbara Moody**, Director of Child and Family Services, Midcoast Maine Community Action Head Start