

EDUCATION WEEK
DIGITAL DIRECTIONS

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Ed. tech. experts tackle the question: Is there still a technological divide between the haves and have-nots?

By **Andrew Trotter**

The “digital divide”—a focus of intense national attention in the 1990s—has slipped to the policy periphery since the start of this decade. But dozens of educators who gathered in Atlanta this summer for what was billed as a Digital Equity Summit agreed that gaps in access to computer technologies and digital media between different socioeconomic groups have not gone away. And it is time, they said, to get the issue back onto policymakers’ radar screens.

“There’s definitely been a loss of momentum,” says Jerry Crystal, the technology-integration coach for the 12 magnet schools in the 24,000-student Hartford, Conn., school district. The digital divide in education, he adds, has been overshadowed by the federal No Child Left Behind Act and the demands that its accountability requirements have placed on school resources.

Crystal was one of about 90 educators at the June 23 summit, which fell one day before thousands of people poured into Atlanta for the National Educational Computing Conference, the nation’s biggest annual conference on technology in K-12 education.

Critics of the “digital divide” concept say the problem has largely disappeared as low-income and minority families have acquired computers in greater numbers, and as state and federal money, from such sources as the E-rate program, has been used to redress technology imbalances between rich and poor school districts.

But Bonnie Bracey Sutton, an educator and longtime activist on the issue who attended the digital-equity gathering, says that some progress in closing the divide is slipping away. “There’s a new divide developing around Internet 2 and Web 2.0,” she says, referring to the latest generation of online technologies, including videos, social networking, and software that allows students to work collaboratively.

A critic who was not at the summit responds that these divides are not worrisome.

“The pace of technological diffusion is never perfectly even, but the good news is that digital technology is getting out to the masses faster than every previous media or communication technology in history,” says Adam D. Thierer, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Progress & Freedom Foundation, a think tank that studies the digital revolution and its implications for public policy.

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Thierer says children at every income level are “gaining access to digital gadgets and software at a breakneck pace compared with older technologies, and a problem that many parents will face in the near future is not too little technology, but too much.”

'Digital Equity' Sought

The digital-equity gathering was hosted by the International Society for Technology in Education, or ISTE, a Washington-based membership organization that also hosts NECC.

Debates over the digital divide have been dogged by disagreements over how the gap is defined, and therefore quantified, as a report that ISTE released at the summit suggested. “Though an exact definition remains elusive, the term ‘digital divide’ generally refers to the disconnect that occurs between those with access to technology and those without, while recognizing the myriad factors that can have an impact on that inequity,” the report says.

Rather than a “divide,” most participants used the term “digital equity,” which the report defines as much by educational outcomes as on technological inputs. “When considering the role of technology in development of the 21st-century learner, digital equity is more than a comparable delivery of goods and services, but fair distribution based on students’ needs,” it says.

The report, “A National Consideration of Digital Equity,” offers ideas for addressing the issue, such as using project-based learning to “explore the intellectual capacity of non-English-speaking students,” providing open computer labs after school and on weekends, and tapping local colleges and universities to help with technology training for teachers.

Speakers at the digital-equity summit underscored what they alleged to be the technological malnutrition that continues to put children who belong to racial or ethnic minorities, are female, or come from poor families at an educational disadvantage.

“Why are the same children losing out, as we keep redefining the digital divide?” asked Sylvia G. Rousseau, a professor at the University of Southern California, in her keynote speech at the digital-equity gathering.

Gaps in Use

Arguing that technology has posed particular educational and social problems for disadvantaged children, Rousseau sketched a history of what she sees as technology’s negative impact on African-Americans—sweeping the cotton gin, the Cadillac automobile, movies and television, the boom box, the iPod, and drill-and-practice software—into her analysis.

“As much as I admire technology, ... it has a mixed history in the way it has impacted our lives,” said Rousseau, who is African-American.

And she pointed to contemporary technology—including TV, video games, the Web, and educational software—as reinforcing a cultural “construct” of race, class, and gender that she contends sets limitations for the academic achievement of disadvantaged children. “The issue isn’t all technology,” she said, “yet in this day, it has everything to do with technology.”

In today's schools, Rousseau said, low-income children of color too often are using educational software that has them engage in skill-and-fact drills rather than in creative, "constructivist" experiences more often available to white and middle-class children.

Her point resonated with Crystal, the technology-integration coach from Hartford.

He says school districts are spending their educational technology budgets on "drill and kill" tools because of the overwhelming pressure to meet federal requirements for test performance under the No Child Left Behind law.

"The focus on NCLB is like just looking at the blue threads in a tapestry; you don't see that [student achievement] is a manifestation of lots of other areas," Crystal says. Without a broader focus and more creative tools, disadvantaged students miss out on important learning modes, such as cooperative learning and sharing ideas with others, he argues.

Not all educators agree that drill technology is bad; some say that with powerful data-collection systems and a focus on key building blocks of learning, drilling students is a valuable use of technology. That perspective, however, was not voiced at the Atlanta summit.

Andrew Trotter, an assistant editor for Education Week, covers technology issues.