



**THE COST OF
THE SCHOOL DAY**



Because growing
up can be hard



DIGITAL EXCLUSION DURING THE PANDEMIC

January 2021

On 5 January 2021, the coronavirus pandemic forced schools across the UK to close their doors to the majority of pupils for the second time in less than a year. Schools and local authorities have reacted quickly to ensure children and families do not miss out on learning and development during this latest closure. However, we know that schools and families are still facing huge challenges in making sure every student has individual access to reliable and high quality digital devices and internet access.

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and Children North East (CNE) research during May 2020 showed that the school closures further exposed and exacerbated the gaps in education caused by low income, with children unable to access or engage in learning because they didn't have adequate resources or an appropriate set-up at home.¹ This research built on the existing work being done by both organisations to identify and remove the financial barriers and poverty-related stigma that prevents children in poverty from fully participating in school life. Together, through the [Poverty Proofing the School Day](#) programme and the [Cost of the School Day](#) project, we have spoken to thousands of pupils and families, as well as school staff, to understand where difficulties might lie for those living on a low income – and which solutions work best for families.

We are already hearing from schools that families and pupils are facing some of the same home learning challenges as last time, which is preventing some children from being able to participate in education.

To solve the immediate issues surrounding digital exclusion, CPAG and CNE urge the government to:

- Rapidly speed up the distribution timetable of the 440,000 purchased devices that are currently available to schools.
- Ensure that every child across England has access to a device for learning and other essential items. This can be done by:
 - Increasing the number of devices schools can apply for, enabling them to meet the needs of their school communities.
 - Providing parents or schools with cash grants allowing them to purchase any ICT equipment that is needed so pupils can learn from home. This may include laptops and WIFI, as well as printers and printer ink.
- Increase child benefit by £10 a week to ensure families have enough money to meet the additional financial pressures placed on families as a result of having children learning at home.

¹ [The Cost of Learning in Lockdown](#), Child Poverty Action Group, June 2020

In relation to digital exclusion, our research found that:

- Low-income families who responded to our survey were twice as likely to say that they lacked all the resources they needed to support learning at home, with 40 per cent saying they were missing at least one essential resource (e.g. digital device, pens and paper, internet access).

“We don’t have a laptop or computer. All the work assigned is meant to be done online, which isn’t an option for us. Unfortunately my daughter can’t access the same online lessons as the other children.” (Lone parent of two children)

“I need a computer to do my assignment. Five of us share one computer in the family.” (Young woman aged 15)

- Low-income families were more likely to tell us they have had to buy educational resources, compared to those in better-off homes. A third of people most worried about money had to purchase a laptop, tablet or other device during lockdown.

“I’ve had to borrow money to buy a device we don’t really need or can’t afford so my child doesn’t fall behind.” (Lone parent of two children)

- Families who were worried about money were more likely to say they found it difficult to continue their children’s education at home. Around a third of all families who responded said that they were enjoying learning at home, and these families were much less likely to report having money worries or lacking the resources they needed.

“I feel that my daughter is missing out on her education, because I’m not financially able to get her a computer. She shouldn’t have to fall so far behind due to our financial situation.” (Mum of two children)

- Children and young people valued being able to communicate with their teachers online, but phone calls were also highly appreciated by those who had received them.

“The school sends assembly and messages to mum to check we are OK. My teacher sends me learning and positive messages that cheer me up.” (Girl aged 7)

- Pupils who reported doing a lot of work at home were also more likely to report that their schools had provided them with the resources to help them work at home. Pupils also reported that getting feedback on work from teachers was more difficult if they didn’t have online access. This left some feeling stuck and unable to progress with learning.

“I’ve been lent a chromebook which is easier as before there were 3 of us trying to share 1 laptop to get work done.” (Boy aged 13)

“It was really hard because we had just started a new subject, I had no help because my aunty didn’t know what they were so she was looking up on the internet” (Pupil aged 9)

While various national schemes have been launched since the first school closures in an attempt to close the digital divide, many pupils across England still have no or limited online access. In England, the number of devices and routers available has been insufficient with many schools reporting that their allocation doesn’t meet the need.

It was estimated that between 1.14 and 1.78 million children across the UK have no home access to a laptop, desktop or tablet.² The Department for Education's (DfE) ambition to dispatch 750,000 laptops by the middle of January 2021 only addresses the issue for a proportion of these pupils. We have heard from schools that demand for devices is outstripping the availability, with some schools reporting that they have not yet received their full allocation from the DfE. We are also already hearing of schools that have larger numbers of pupils attending compared to the last school closure, with additional young people attending because they do not have access to online learning at home. Pupils are reporting feeling a lot of anxiety about the amount of work they are missing out on during the period of home learning, and are concerned about not being able to catch up on this work.

The government's decision to cut school laptop allocations in October 2020³ (a decision that was eventually reversed) combined with schools only previously being able to request laptops for isolating pupils, has left many schools and pupils unprepared and without the right resources to move quickly into an extended period of remote learning. The national schemes have also been set up to predominantly target families who are eligible for free school meals.⁴ However, CPAG's research shows that two in five children in England who are living below the poverty line are not eligible for free school meals,⁵ with many of these families reporting that they lack the resources and devices that their children need to take part in learning. Beyond the government responses, schools, local authorities and local businesses have tried to plug gaps but there are still many children who are missing out. The number of laptops being made available to schools needs to be urgently reviewed.

Delivering devices alone does not fully address the issue of 'connectivity', with 880,000 children and young people living in a home with only a mobile internet connection.⁶ Schools have reported that take-up of additional sim cards has been low amongst families in certain areas. Even with mobile companies expanding data plans, this still means that children's learning is dependent on phone reception which can often be unreliable or slow. For pupils to fully participate in lessons and school tasks they need proper, reliable internet access – not just mobile phone data. Beyond lacking devices and internet connections, we also heard from many families that they were missing other important items such as printers and stationery. Some parents described copying out worksheets by hand in the mornings and evenings so children could complete schoolwork.

Finally, from our research, we know that home learning puts additional pressures on family budgets through increasing bills such as energy and heating. Many low income families struggled with this during the first lockdown. Families should never have to choose between their child's education and other household needs. Additional financial support is urgently needed to ensure that families are financially able to meet these costs over the coming months.

Previous CPAG and CNE research shows that the digital divide existed prior to the pandemic with many children struggling to complete homework.⁷ The pandemic has highlighted the digital divide on a national scale and effective action must now be taken to address this wide-reaching educational inequality. As we come out of the pandemic, appropriate digital access will be vital to enable students to successfully complete their homework, and their exam coursework, as well as providing them with a tool to stay in social contact.

If you have any questions, or would like to meet to discuss digital exclusion or school costs, please contact David Bradley, England Development Manager at Child Poverty Action Group dbradley@cpag.org.uk or Francesca Hogg, Poverty Proofing Practice Advisor at Children North East francesca.hogg@children-ne.org.uk.

² [Children without internet access during lockdown](#), Children's Commissioner, August 2020

³ ['100k more laptops for schools – but access is slashed'](#), Schools Week, 23 October 2020

⁴ [Device Allocations](#), Department for Education

⁵ [Two in five UK children under the poverty line are not eligible for free school meals](#), Child Poverty Action Group, 3 December 2020

⁶ ['As millions of children remote learning suffer bad connections, internet providers have to offer free data'](#), Independent 7 January 2021

⁷ [The Cost of the School Day Dundee report](#), Child Poverty Action Group, 2018