The Digital Learning Equity Act of 2015
Senator Angus King (I-ME) and Senator Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV)

The Issue: Twenty-four hour access to digital learning opportunities has rapidly become an essential component of effective learning and teaching, but as these advancements pick up steam, many students risk being left behind. Whether completing a homework assignment, communicating with a teacher outside of the school day, or applying for a postsecondary opportunity, access to the Internet and digital learning tools outside of the classroom has become a fundamental educational resource.

While teachers in 96 percent of districts assign homework that requires Internet use,[1] nearly one-third of low-income households with children lack a high-speed connection at home.[2] This divide disproportionately impacts minority students. With over one half of public school students now receiving free or reduced-price lunch,[3] the proportion of students who may lack adequate access to digital learning services and tools outside of the classroom will continue to be a challenge as we work to modernize our K-12 education system.

The **Digital Learning Equity Act of 2015** aims to narrow this growing divide by exploring new ways to ensure students stay connected when they leave the classroom. This bill would authorize states and school districts to test out, on a limited basis, innovative methods to increase student access to digital learning resources outside of the school day with the goal of increasing student, parent, and educator engagement and improving the ability of students to participate in innovative learning models, apply for work opportunities, and fill out college applications and financial aid forms.

Bill Summary:

Section 1 – The Digital Learning Equity Act of 2015

Section 2 – Authorizes a demonstration program to pilot innovative approaches to expanding digital learning opportunities outside of the classroom and increasing home Internet access for eligible students.
- Pilot program would authorize states or school districts, independently or in partnership with outside entities, to test out effective ways to keep students connected to digital learning resources outside of the school day.
- States or school districts could partner with a host of entities, such as a library, non-profit, business, or afterschool program, to carry out the pilot.
- Pilots would be run in high-need schools with significant concentrations of low-income students or a high percentage of students lacking out-of-school Internet access.
- Pilots could be authorized for up to two years and would be subject to a rigorous evaluation to track the impact on student, educator, and parent engagement to inform broader efforts to improve out-of-school access to digital learning resources.
- Pilots would be geographically representative of the diversity of school districts to ensure sufficiently representative data and a wide range of projects.

Section 3 – Authorizes the Institute of Education Sciences, in consultation with relevant federal agencies, to conduct a national study on the state of student access to digital learning resources at home. Specifically, the study would examine:
- The proportion and frequency of educators assigning homework that requires home Internet access;
- The causes associated with students lacking home access to digital learning resources;
- The impact of limited home access on student participation, engagement, and ability to complete assignments;
- Ways in which limited home access impacts or alters the instructional practice of educators; and
- Effective strategies employed by educators to address the differing levels of home access among students.

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[1] Grunwald Associates, "Turning the Corner: Select Trends in Education Technology," http://www.grunwald.com/pdfs/GRUNWALD-CoSN-TED-X-2-EXPANDED.pdf

[2] John B. Horrigan, "The Numbers Behind the Broadband 'Homework Gap,'" Pew Research Center, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/20/the-numbers-behind-the-broadband-homework-gap/.

[3] Southern Education Foundation, "A New Majority," http://www.southerneducation.org/Our-Strategies/Research-and-Publications/New-Majority-Diverse-Majority-Report-Series/A-New-Majority-2015-Update-Low-Income-Students-Now