



New Jersey Economic Development Authority

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION ("RFI")
2020-RFI-OET-Covid19-109
for

Bridging the Digital Divide for New Jersey's Students

July 16, 2020

1. INTENT/SUMMARY OF SCOPE

The New Jersey Economic Development Authority ("NJEDA" or the "Authority"), an independent Authority of the State of New Jersey, in conjunction with its state agency partners and the Office of the Governor, is issuing this Request for Information (RFI) seeking information and ideas to bridge the digital divide for New Jersey's Pre-K-to-12 students.

These perspectives will help the Authority better understand potential solutions to ensure that New Jersey's students, educators and parents/guardians have sufficient access to the appropriate digital technology, internet connectivity and training to foster successful remote learning (as needed), as the State continues to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The information gathered in this RFI may subsequently be used to help the Authority, its partner agencies, and other concerned entities develop strategies, programs, or other initiatives to help accomplish this goal.

THIS RFI IS NOT A REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL and may not result in a subsequent RFP or further action.

2. BACKGROUND

The New Jersey Economic Development Authority serves as the State's principal agency for driving economic growth. The Authority is committed to making New Jersey a national model for inclusive and sustainable economic development by focusing on key strategies to help build strong and dynamic communities, create good jobs for New Jersey residents and provide pathways to a stronger and fairer economy. Through partnerships with a diverse range of stakeholders, the Authority creates and implements initiatives to enhance the economic vitality and quality of life in the State and strengthen New Jersey's long-term economic competitiveness.

On March 16, 2020, Governor Murphy issued Executive Order 104, calling for schools to halt in-person instruction to protect the State from the spread of COVID-19. That Executive Order triggered widespread

changes to the State's education system and way of life. Educators transitioned critical services to remote settings; families turned their living rooms into classrooms; and students took on new lives balancing their studies with the deep personal and socioemotional impacts of this pandemic.

Technology is increasingly central to how we learn, work, and communicate. But the digital divide (broadly defined as inequitable distribution and access to modern information and communications technology) has been a longstanding challenge confronting New Jersey. The issue has taken on new urgency as 1.4 million public school students and more than 600 local education agencies rapidly shifted to a remote learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In March 2020, a New Jersey Department of Education ("NJDOE") survey reported that among students in New Jersey's public schools, approximately 110,000 students did not have internet access at home. Moving into April 2020, a second survey showed the total number of students without reliable internet had decreased from 110,000 to 89,000. The same survey also found that about 130,000 students were still in need of devices such as laptops and tablets. This data on the availability of devices relates to the total number of students, not the number of families or households. For example, if 2 students live within a household, the household would require 2 separate devices so the students could participate in concurrent remote learning if needed.

Data from a third NJDOE survey issued in June 2020 is expected to show that the number of students without devices and/or connectivity is now higher than previously reported by districts. This increase suggests that some school districts may have under-reported or miscalculating data in the first two surveys. The NJDOE has reconciled the inconsistencies in district-reported survey data by employing a formula to calculate student device/connectivity need that involves both the June 2020 survey data and low-income enrollment data as a proxy for need. This calculation estimates that more than 230,000 students lack access to a digital device and/or reliable internet connectivity.

On June 26, 2020, Governor Murphy and NJDOE Commissioner Lamont O. Repollet released the state's [Restart & Recovery Plan: The Road Back](#), which provides New Jersey's school communities with information to ensure that our schools reopen safely during this unprecedented time. The plan states:

"Each school district should strive to ensure that every student has access to a device and internet connectivity. Districts should prioritize the provision of technology, or, alternatively, in-person instruction, to students that are otherwise without access. Additionally, these districts should include in their reopening plan the steps taken to address the technology deficit and how it will be resolved as soon as possible." Under the plan's guidelines, NJ school districts should:

- Conduct a needs assessment. Determine the number of students that will require district-provided devices and/or internet access in order to access remote education. It is important to consider the technological needs of all students, including those with learning disabilities, assistive technology needs, and language barriers.
- Consider the attendant needs associated with deployment of needed technology, including student and parent trainings and acceptable use policy implementation.
- Prioritize the purchase and roll-out of devices and/or connectivity that may improve learning based on the results of the needs assessment. The information provided in this section, along with funding options in the School Funding section, provide strategies for maximizing available funding to ensure students have access to devices and internet connectivity to improve remote instruction.

- For students with special needs, accommodations according to their instructional program must be addressed as appropriate for each student.
- Additionally, any district that faces a device or connectivity shortage should address technology challenges in their reopening plan. This should include the steps the district has already taken to address the technology divide and how the district plans to provide devices and/or connectivity to students that need them.

The purpose of this RFI is solely to seek ideas for bridging the digital divide should it become necessary for students and districts to undertake or continue with the model of remote education in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. This RFI is not making any statement or providing any notification, directly or indirectly, regarding decisions regarding the reopening of schools and the methodology of educating New Jersey students starting in fall 2020. Rather, this RFI aims to gather information so that if New Jersey students do need to participate in remote learning – of any type or duration – the State has received input on how best to support and equip students, families and educators to succeed in that environment.

The federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act includes specific funding sources for Local Education Agencies (LEAs). Specifically, section 18003 of the Act establishes the Elementary Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund. The core purpose of the ESSER Fund is to provide direct money to LEAs to address the areas most impacted by the disruption and closure of schools caused by COVID-19.

A portion of New Jersey's CARES ESSER funding is designated for educational technology, which will have a significant impact on bridging the digital divide for New Jersey students during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as we look towards the 2020-2021 school year, the State anticipates there will still be an unmet need among New Jersey students and school districts.

To address that need, this RFI aims to gather information in three core areas:

- 1) **TECHNOLOGY:** Strategies to provide adequate devices for each PreK-to-12 student in New Jersey to participate in remote learning (as needed). This would include, but not be limited to, laptops (e.g. Chromebooks) and tablets (e.g. iPads).
- 2) **CONNECTIVITY:** Access to reliable high-speed internet connectivity. This includes devices to access the internet (e.g. WiFi hotspot, router) and ongoing service with an internet service provider.
- 3) **TRAINING:** Training, technical assistance and professional development for students, parents/guardians, and educators who are not experienced in effective remote learning methods, including use of technology.

Consistent with guidance from the United States Department of Education, districts must continue to meet their obligations to all students including students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), students experiencing homelessness, low-income students, and students at risk of not meeting the State's challenging academic standards. Any item, good, service, or professional development/technical assistance provided by a vendor may need to be modified to assist a district in meeting this requirement.

The Authority is interested in creative approaches to bridge the digital divide to enable the State to ensure that it can support successful remote learning for all students across New Jersey from the densely populated northern part of the state to the most rural areas of the southern part of the state.

3. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA (if applicable)

This is not applicable to this RFI. All ideas are welcomed.

4. RFI RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Please answer all questions that are relevant to you or your organization, to the best of your ability. The Authority recognizes that respondents may not be able to answer all questions. Answers to these questions are understood to be preliminary and non-binding.

Respondents are free to structure responses as necessary to increase clarity and efficiency of responses.

Description of your role and qualifications related to remote learning and educational technology:

- 1) Please provide information on your company, group, government entity, or self and your capacity and qualifications as they relate to remote learning and educational technology.
- 2) What is your experience with and understanding of New Jersey's digital divide, both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 3) Which key areas are you/your organization most qualified to address (choose all that apply)?:
 - a. Access to technology/devices
 - b. Internet connectivity
 - c. Training/technical assistance/professional development
- 4) Please provide your experience with and understanding of both the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) as it relates to remote learning and educational technology. Provide a narrative of how the response meets the requirements of these Acts.
- 5) Please also indicate, where applicable, what specific role your company, group, government entity, or self can play in tackling the digital divide.

Challenges facing New Jersey around remote learning and educational technology:

- 6) What are the biggest challenges/concerns/gaps in the State's current remote learning and educational technology ecosystem?
- 7) Despite considerable progress, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many communities throughout New Jersey still face a digital divide. Can you comment on specific obstacles that have impacted or worsened this divide?

- 8) Can you comment on the remote learning needs of specific populations that may be particularly impacted by the digital divide, including but not limited to:
 - a. English language learners (ELLs)
 - b. Students with disabilities and/or special needs, including students with IEPs and 504 plans
 - c. Younger students who may be unable to use or navigate a digital device without an adult's assistance
 - d. Students experiencing homelessness or housing instability
 - e. Students in urban areas
 - f. Students in suburban areas
 - g. Students in rural areas

Ideas for how to close the digital divide and increase technology access and connectivity:

- 9) What big ideas do you have to supplement gaps in student access to devices and internet connectivity? What role should the State play? What role might private entities, foundations and/or nonprofit organizations play? Please provide specific examples if possible.
- 10) What steps should the State take to ensure that remote learning and educational technology equitably serves the needs of students in historically disadvantaged communities?
- 11) What strategies should the State consider to obtain sufficient hardware and internet access for all students? Are there free or low-cost options that the State should explore, such as donations of goods and/or services directly to school districts?
- 12) When standard home broadband connections are not available or affordable, what nontraditional broadband models should be considered for New Jersey students and school districts?
- 13) Are there particular features of devices and/or connectivity that are important to meeting the remote learning needs of all students, including students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), students experiencing homelessness, low-income students, and students at risk of not meeting the State's challenging academic standards?
- 14) Are there programs from other states/localities that New Jersey should draw from?

Questions about training, professional development and technical assistance:

- 15) Regarding training of students, educators and parents in educational technology, what do you see as the most significant issues that need to be addressed through technical assistance or professional development? Please provide specific examples if possible.
- 16) What training and supports should be provided to students, teachers, and parents/guardians who are not experienced in remote learning methods or using educational technology, e.g. training on data security and online safety? What should be provided when new remote learning tools are introduced, and what should be provided on an ongoing basis?

- 17) What professional development should be provided to educators focusing on the pedagogical aspects of remote learning and tailored to the educational technology employed by districts (e.g. strategies for teachers to collaborate and share best practices or peer-to-peer training)?
- 18) What strategies should the State consider to ensure that educators are able to utilize the accessibility features and accommodations tools made available through technology-based formats that provide individual supports and meet requirements of IEPs and 504 plans?
- 19) What training and technical assistance strategies around remote learning should be considered for English language learners (ELLs) and their parents/guardians?

5. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS (From Respondents to the EDA)

All questions concerning this RFI must be submitted in writing no later than 11:59 PM EST, on Tuesday, July 21st, 2020 via e-mail to: Digitaldivide@njeda.com

The subject line of the e-mail should state: "QUESTIONS-2020 RFI-OET-Covid19-Digitaldivide-109"].

Answers to questions submitted will be publicly posted on the Authority's website on or about Friday, July 24th, 2020 at: <https://www.njeda.com/Bidding-Opportunities-General/Economic-Transformation-RFIs> as Addendum.

IT IS THE RESPONDENT'S RESPONSIBILITY TO CHECK THIS URL REGULARLY FOR UPDATES.

6. RESPONSE DETAILS (Info Provided to Respondents Regarding Document Submission)

All RFI responses must be submitted in writing no later than 11:59 PM EST on Friday, July 31st, 2020, via e-mail to: Digitaldivide@njeda.com

The subject line of the e-mail should state: "RFI Response-2020-RFI-OET-COVID19-Digitaldivide-109".

7. FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS (from EDA) / **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

Respondents may be asked to provide additional information to allow the Authority to better understand the responses or proposed solutions.

8. PROPRIETARY AND/OR CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

The Authority reserves the right to copy any information provided by the Respondents. The Authority reserves the right to use ideas that are provided by Respondents, applicants, stakeholders, or vendors. By submitting a Response, the submitter represents that such copying or use of information will not violate any copyrights, licenses, or other agreements with respect to information submitted or product solutions demonstrated, if applicable. Responses must clearly be marked for any information the Respondent deems Proprietary and/or Confidential.

9. DISCLAIMER / NO OBLIGATION

This RFI is not a request for qualification/proposal. It may or may not result in further action.

This RFI is issued solely as a means of gathering information and ideas regarding the Authority's desire to understand strategies to close the digital divide in New Jersey. Interested parties responding to this RFI do so at their own expense. There will be no monetary compensation from the Authority for the time and effort spent in preparing the response to this RFI. All expenses incurred are the sole responsibility of the Respondent.

Should the Authority decide to move forward and issue an RFQ/P or announce a program/product related to this RFI, Respondents need not have submitted a response to this RFI in order to be eligible to respond to the RFP. Should an RFQ/P be issued, responding to this RFI will not affect scoring or consideration for that process.

The Authority is under no obligation to contact Respondents to this RFI.

10. NEW JERSEY OPEN PUBLIC RECORDS ACT

Respondents should be aware that responses to this RFI are subject to the "New Jersey Open Public Records Act" (N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1 et seq.), as amended and including all applicable regulations and policies and applicable case law, including the New Jersey Right-to-Know law. All information submitted in response to the RFI is considered public information, notwithstanding any disclaimers to the contrary, except as may be exempted from public disclosure by OPRA and the common law.

Any proprietary and/or confidential information submitted in response to this RFI will be redacted by the Authority. A person or entity submitting a response to this RFI may designate specific information as not subject to disclosure pursuant to the exceptions to OPRA found at N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.1, when such person or entity has a good faith legal and/or factual basis for such assertion (i.e. information that may be included in another ongoing public procurement or solicitation). The Authority reserves the right to make the determination as to what is proprietary or confidential and will advise the person or entity accordingly. The Authority will not honor any attempt to designate the entirety of a submission as proprietary, confidential and/or to claim copyright protection for the entire proposal. In the event of any challenge to the Respondent's assertion of confidentiality with which the Authority does not concur, the Respondent shall be solely responsible for defending its designation.