



Ensuring Access to PCs Key to Addressing Homework Gap

Amend Clinton-era Executive Order to allow federal government to distribute used IT to certified recyclers

By Todd Zegers, Ingram Micro

For most of us, it's a given as we adapt to COVID-19: We'll have a reliable 24/7 connection to online resources that enable us to work or learn from home. But school closures due to the pandemic have spotlighted the persistence of the digital divide: Too many students lack the equipment and connections they need for distance learning. But there is way to help students gain access to the equipment they need: Amend an outdated 1996 executive order to allow the GSA to distribute used IT assets to certified recyclers for refurbishment.

This equality issue has [delayed the shift to online education](#) for many public school students across the country. Detroit teachers had to rely on paper packets of lessons, as approximately 90 percent of the 51,000 students in the city's [high-poverty public schools](#) do not have the technology at home for online learning. Even in homes with a computer, it may not be enough for [families with multiple children](#) who need to keep up with homework.

Lack of PCs is a core part of the problem, along with the need for high-speed connections. One in four lower-income teens do not have access to a home computer, according to a recent study by the [Pew Research Center](#). That compares to just 4% in households earning more than \$75,000. The gaps are especially pronounced in Hispanic households.

Funding Available, But a Lack of Supply

The CARES Act provides funding for federal programs aimed at closing the digital divide and supporting distance learning. The relief bill allocates \$13.2 billion to the Education Department for an "Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund," which defines eligible uses as including the "[purchase of educational technology (including hardware, software, and connectivity) for students."

However, there is currently a shortage of new equipment on the market. This is due largely to factory closures in Asia and other supply issues, combined with skyrocketing demand. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported, stores have been ["stripped of laptops as coronavirus increases working from home."](#)

America's electronics refurbishment and recycling companies are playing a vital role by providing quality refurbished equipment that supplements constrained supplies of new technology. Whether a family needs its first PC, or additional technology to support several children, refurbished technology provides a more affordable option for lower-income families.

However, here again there is a shortage due to the pandemic. Refurbishers usually source used-but-still-useful IT equipment from companies upgrading to new equipment. As COVID-19 has slowed the economy, few companies are investing in new hardware, which has slowed the pipeline of refurbished tech that can support distance learning.

Surplus equipment from government agencies could help fill the gap and ensure more learners get the equipment they need. However, under a 1996 Executive Order (EO 12999), used federal assets can only be distributed by the federal General Services Administration (GSA) to nonprofit organizations for refurbishment and distribution to schools.

A lot has changed in the nearly quarter-century since the EO was signed: Today's advanced refurbishment industry in the United States was barely in its infancy at that time. Private-sector companies now offer sophisticated refurbishing processes that deliver a like-new experience for end users at a much lower cost than new equipment.

The solution: Amend EO 12999 to allow the GSA to distribute used IT assets to certified recyclers. These private companies can then refurbish it to high standards and get it to people in need. It is a relatively simple change that can make a big impact as the country continues to cope with COVID-19.

A Long-Term Challenge

The homework gap is not a problem that's likely to go away soon. E-learning may be a continued need depending on the course of COVID-19 and the need for stay-at-home mandates. Even if schools reopen in the fall, they will need procedures for closing again, as outlined in a new [Blueprint for Back to School](#).

We need to ensure that all families have the resources they need for success and amending EO12999 is a step in the right direction.

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