



SREB

Wiring the Future

*Building an Infrastructure for
Broadband Access*

March 2025

Southern
Regional
Education
Board

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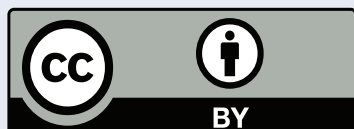
This report was written by Melissa Juarez, SREB research analyst, and Allison Buckley, SREB program specialist, at the Southern Regional Education Board. It was produced with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.

This report would not have been possible the help of a talented and resourceful team. SREB acknowledges contributions from former SREB staff members Charlotte Dailey, Elle Davis and David Garcia in guiding the discussions and planning for this paper. Special recognition is given to Elle Davis for her initial work on the report draft.

Additionally, SREB thanks each member of the Educational Technology Cooperative for their expertise and insightful edits that have informed the content of this report.

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Overview

In today's technology-driven world, reliable broadband access is critical for student success. Whether completing online assignments, attending virtual classes or accessing educational resources, students depend on fast and stable internet connections to fully engage with digital educational tools. Schools and universities increasingly use digital platforms to house course content, assignments and discussion boards. Without adequate broadband access, students face significant barriers to learning.

Forty-two percent of the SREB Educational Technology Cooperative members identified broadband as a 2023 priority issue.

This brief is the first issue of a three-part series, *Wiring the Future*. The goal of the series is to capture the region's policies and progress surrounding broadband, open educational resources and digital learning horizons as discussed by the Educational Technology Cooperative between January 2023 and March 2024. The SREB ETC functions as an advisory body, meeting quarterly to communicate and inform SREB about state-wide education technology practices. As SREB delves into the five core priorities established in 2023 — Artificial Intelligence in Education, Career Pathways, Longitudinal Literacy, Postsecondary Student Success and Teacher Workforce — the ETC will continue convening to share information and inform SREB on emerging education issues that fall within the scope of the core priorities. Members of the ETC can be found in Appendix A.

Focusing on broadband access in its first issue, SREB has identified the need to support efforts to expand broadband access and awareness across the South, particularly in dead zones, low-income areas and communities lacking network resiliency. Dead zones refer to geographical areas where devices receive low or no signal, and network resiliency describes a network's ability to withstand and recover from natural disasters, cyberattacks, and other unexpected events. Policy research and promising practices presented in this paper are a synthesis of the most frequently discussed themes that emerged from the ETC's conversations throughout their quarterly convenings. More information on the methods of this analysis can be found in Appendix B.

What is broadband?

Broadband refers to the infrastructure that drives digital connectivity; it is a tool used to access the internet for communication, information gathering, public services and more at high speed across large distances.

In March 2024, the Federal Communications Commission raised the broadband speed benchmark from a download speed of 25 megabits per second and an upload speed of 3 megabits per second (25/3) to a download speed of 100 megabits per second and an upload speed of 20 megabits per second (100/20).



What barriers to broadband access do Americans currently face?

Several barriers to broadband access exist for communities throughout the South, including geographical challenges, infrastructure and subscription costs and a digital literacy gap. In 2021, the White House identified in a brief [Fact Sheet: The Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal](#) that over 30 million Americans lived in areas where there was no broadband infrastructure that met minimally acceptable speeds. According to the Center on Rural Innovation, rural communities and areas struggling with natural disaster resiliency [continue to be impacted](#) by low or sporadic access to the internet, limiting students' ability to complete coursework and learn at a level comparable to their digitally connected peers.

Even in major cities with advanced infrastructure, many Americans experience financial challenges that limit their access to internet at home. When analyzing 290 internet plans, a [report](#) by New America found that consumers paid an average of \$68.38 per month; they also found that among all major cities included in their study, Atlanta, Georgia, had the highest average price at over \$100 per month.

Accessing broadband at home continues to be a challenge for rural and low-income residents.

The [Pew Research Center](#) reported that in 2024, there was a 17 percentage point gap between Americans who used the internet (96%) and who had access to home broadband (79%). For rural communities, this gap widened to 22 percentage points, and for urban communities, the gap widened to 20 percentage points. Thus, even in well connected, urban areas, there were barriers beyond infrastructure that impacted whether residents were accessing the internet at home.

When looking across income groups, the internet and home broadband use gaps widened further. For residents making less than \$30,000 a year, there was a 34 percentage point gap between residents who used the internet (91%) and those who had access to home broadband (57%). As income increased, groups experienced smaller gaps. Overall, Pew's data suggests that although more residents have connected to the internet over the years, accessing broadband at home continues to be a challenge for rural and low-income residents.

Table 1. Internet and Home Broadband Use by Income Groups in 2024

Income Group	Internet Use	Home Broadband Use	Gap
Less than \$30,000	91%	57%	34%
\$30,000-\$69,999	97%	78%	19%
\$70,000-\$99,999	98%	88%	10%
\$100,000	99%	92%	7%

Source: [Pew Research Center](#)

How have federal and state governments responded to these challenges?

Federal initiatives have responded to cost-related challenges through funding for broadband subsidies. Beginning Dec. 31, 2021, the [Affordable Connectivity Program](#), which replaced the Emergency Broadband Benefit, provided eligible households with \$30 discounts (\$75 if on tribal lands) on their internet bill. However, the program has sunset as of June 1, 2024, due to a lack of additional funding from Congress, leaving states, internet service providers and local communities to fill in the gaps.


For example, North Carolina introduced [SB 558](#) in 2023 to provide partial or total broadband subsidies for low-income households at or below 135% of the federal poverty line. Some internet service providers, including AT&T, Comcast, Spectrum and Verizon, agreed to continue honoring discount internet plans until the end of 2024 for households who had enrolled in the ACP, according to a [news article](#) by *The Hill*.

Broadband accessibility gaps were exacerbated by forced school closures and the sudden shift to distance learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Florida ETC member John Opper reflected on this change, stating that “when COVID-19 hit, students used to sit in the parking lot or sit by the school bus [stop] in their neighborhood to get Wi-Fi. We discovered suddenly how many people don’t have access to those things.”

Internet access quickly became a student’s most important school supply, as school closures meant that learning had to be done exclusively online. When many students began to rely on alternative connectivity locations, the need for broadband access was apparent.

Although the pandemic thrust many of the SREB states into exploring fast, alternative solutions, most states in the SREB region have started to invest in long-term broadband infrastructure. In 2022, the [Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs](#) published a broadband connectivity map, an initiative by the state of Alabama to expand high-speed internet access. The map visualizes the state’s dead zones and access to 25/3 (25 Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload), 100/20 and 1000/1000 service speeds by census block, hoping to identify areas with limited connectivity and highlight opportunities for investment. According to the [Selma Sun](#), ADECA collaborated with 57 internet service providers to develop the map. Other states in the region have published their own broadband connectivity maps, including [Arkansas](#), [Delaware](#), [Florida](#), [Georgia](#), [Kentucky](#), [Louisiana](#), [Maryland](#), [Mississippi](#), [North Carolina](#), [Oklahoma](#), [South Carolina](#), [Tennessee](#), [Texas](#) and [Virginia](#).

Broadband accessibility gaps were exacerbated by forced school closures and the sudden shift to distance learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.



This research has allowed states to apply for funding and create last mile and middle mile expansion projects. In the case of Alabama, and like for many other states, the state obtained funds made available by the [American Rescue Plan Act](#) of 2021. The federal stimulus bill aimed to advance public health and economic recovery after the pandemic. Alabama determined that they would use funding from ARPA's State Fiscal Recovery Fund to expand broadband infrastructure. In February 2024, [Gov. Kay Ivey](#) announced that over \$188 million was being provided to 12 service providers to install more than 4,000 miles of “middle-mile” projects throughout Alabama.

While middle mile projects do not connect directly to an end-user location, the [U.S. Government Accountability Office](#) states that they transport connection from internet backbones — transmission lines that link global internet networks — to last mile networks. Last mile networks then enable homes and businesses to access the internet. In addition to the State Fiscal Recovery Fund, ADECA has used funding from the [Capital Projects Fund](#), the [Broadband Equity Access and Deployment Program](#) and the [Digital Equity Act](#) to drive broadband expansion initiatives. All states in the region have been allocated funding for broadband expansion under at least three of these federal grants.

Recent Federal Funding Opportunities for Broadband Expansion

[State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds](#): Program under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 that allocates \$350B of federal funds to state, territorial, local and Tribal governments to support their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These funds can be used to cover public health expenses, invest in community infrastructure and address negative economic impacts of the pandemic.

[Capital Projects Funds](#): Program under ARPA that allocates \$10B of federal funds to states, territories, freely associated states and Tribal governments for critical capital projects aimed at expanding access to high-quality internet, improving digital connectivity and modernizing community infrastructure.

[Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment Program](#): Program under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 that provides over \$42B of federal funding to expand high-speed internet access across the United States. The program funds planning, infrastructure deployment and adoption programs beginning with initial planning funds to create a five-year action plan.

[Digital Equity Act](#): Program under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 that provides over \$2.75B of federal funding to establish three grant programs that promote digital access and inclusion.

Sources: National Telecommunications and Information Administration, U.S. Department of the Treasury

Table 2. Funding Allocations for Broadband Projects by Program and State, as of October 2024

State	ARPA State Fiscal Recovery Fund	ARPA Capital Projects Fund	Bead Program	Digital Equity Act Planning and State Capacity Grants
Alabama	\$345.0M	\$182.3M	\$1.4B	\$14.7M
Arkansas	\$316.2M	\$150.2M	\$1.2B	\$11.0M
Delaware	\$41.0M*	—	\$107.7M	\$5.3M
Florida	\$400.0M	\$247.7M	\$1.2B	\$44.2M
Georgia	\$407.9M	\$246.1M	\$1.3B	\$23.9M
Kentucky	\$117.2M	\$179.1M	\$1.1B	\$13.0M
Louisiana	—	\$171.4M	\$1.4B	\$13.7M
Maryland	\$300.0M	\$166.2M	\$267.7M	\$14.4M
Mississippi	—	\$151.5M	\$1.2B	\$11.6M
North Carolina	\$350.0M	\$259.9M	\$1.5B	\$23.8M
Oklahoma	\$385.0M	\$159.3M	\$797.4M	\$12.1M
South Carolina	\$214.2M	\$185.1M	\$551.5M	\$13.8M
Tennessee	\$500.0M	\$205.0M	\$813.3M	\$16.9M
Texas	—	\$461.6M	\$3.3B	\$58.8M
Virginia	\$497.0M	\$208.8M	\$1.5B	\$19.6M
West Virginia	\$92.4M	\$129.5M	\$1.1B	\$9.9M

Note: Delaware’s estimated ARPA State Fiscal Recovery allocation comes from the [2024 Recovery Plan](#) by the Delaware Governor’s Office; other states’ allocations are from the National Conference of State Legislatures [ARPA Fund Database](#).

Sources: [National Conference of State Legislatures](#), [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), [InternetForAll.gov](#),

* [State of Delaware Office of the Governor](#)

What role have community and industry partnerships played in driving broadband access?

Broadband expansion is not only reliant on funding but also on collaboration between governments and private industry players. In Arkansas, [13 electric cooperatives](#) came together in 2022 to serve as a new wholesale broadband provider, the Diamond State Network. Together, the co-ops committed to investing over \$1.66 million in fiber optic infrastructure and expanding internet access to over 1.25 million Arkansas residents. As of 2024, the [Diamond State Network](#) stretched over 50,000 miles of fiber, providing high-quality network access to 1.5 million residents.

Outside of infrastructure needs, expanding network access is also dependent on user knowledge. While communities may have the infrastructure to support high-quality internet access, some residents may not be equipped with the digital literacy to make informed decisions about their broadband needs. Florida ETC member Rebel Cummings-Sauls highlighted that community centers such as libraries and schools are narrowing the digital divide through digital literacy programs.

In 2022, the Public Library Association, supported by AT&T, launched the [PLA Digital Workshop Incentives](#) that supported hundreds of libraries with funding to host workshops focusing on basic digital skills. PLA initially selected over 40 public library systems in the SREB region to take part in the program. One of the awardees, [Cobb County Public Library](#) in Georgia, hosted 26 workshops between fall 2022 and spring 2023 with PLA funding. PLA recently [awarded](#) \$1.27 million dollars to over 200 U.S. libraries in 2023, funding over 2,000 workshops and reaching over 11,000 learners.

Expanding broadband access across the SREB region is successful when combining infrastructure development, strategic funding and community outreach. As states make progress in overcoming geographical and financial barriers to broadband connectivity, their efforts underscore the ongoing need for collaboration between governments, private industry, and local organizations. At the same time, digital literacy is equally as important as physical network access. Bridging the digital divide will enable communities to fully participate in and benefit from the digital economy.

Expanding broadband access across the SREB region is successful when combining infrastructure development, strategic funding and community outreach.



Promising Practices

Improving broadband access across Southern communities requires guidance from individuals across various backgrounds and expertise. The ETC has identified the following promising practices that have led to successful implementation of broadband access initiatives in their states:

Collaboration with Industry Players: Foster strategic partnerships among educational institutions, community stakeholders and industry leaders to advance broadband deployment efforts that address connectivity challenges. These partnerships can facilitate knowledge sharing, resource allocation and joint initiatives to address technological challenges.

Infrastructure Needs Assessment: Prioritize the development and sustainability of rural broadband infrastructure, considering resiliency during natural disasters and collaborating with community members, local organizations and private stakeholders.

Minimizing Digital Divide: Leverage local community centers such as libraries to host digital literacy and awareness initiatives. These spaces can serve as hubs for training and support, meeting the unique needs of each community in ways that larger programs may not.

Student Support and Access Initiatives: Expand awareness and outreach efforts to promote available assistance programs at the federal, state and institutional level. Ensuring that eligible students are informed about affordable internet options is essential to support academic success and close the digital divide.

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Appendix A

Members of the SREB Educational Technology Cooperative

Alabama

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Relinda Ruth

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Alyssa Moore

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Rebel Cummings-Sauls

John Opper

Faye Jones

Georgia

Robert Keown

Charmayne Patterson

Jon Sizemore

Kentucky

David Couch

Louisiana

Missy LaCour

Megan Lowe

Carol Mosley

Maryland

Alexandra (Alix) Chaillou

Trish (McCown) Gordon

Ebony Walters

Mississippi

Ray Smith

North Carolina

Katherine Davis

Vanessa Wrenn

Oklahoma

Brad Griffith

South Carolina

Tennessee

Ryan Kortstange

Michael Torrence

Texas

Michelle Singh

Kylah Torre

Virginia

Dorothy Jones

Kirstin Pantazis

West Virginia

Corley Dennison

Industry Partners

Ahrash Bissell (The NROC Project)

Wiley Brazier (We Greaux People)

Glen Spencer (Propel Center)

Eric Wood (Apple)

Invited Presenters

Nicole Allen (SPARC)

Jinann Bitar (EdTrust)

Maureen Neighbors (ADECA)

Melinda Newfarmer (ISKME)

Appendix B

Methods

The content of this paper is grounded in the qualitative data collection from quarterly meetings of the SREB Education Technology Cooperative from January 2023 and March 2024. These meetings focused on three key issues: open educational resources, broadband and digital learning horizons. The goal of the data collection was to capture the recurring themes, best practices and ideas shared by ETC members across the SREB states, which inform the promising practices around broadband in this paper.

SREB gathered data from nine transcripts and six sets of survey responses which documented discussions and presentations during the quarterly ETC meetings.

SREB gathered data from nine transcripts and six sets of survey responses which documented discussions and presentations during the quarterly ETC meetings. The audio recordings of these meetings were transcribed by an SREB research analyst, who reviewed and corrected the transcriptions to ensure accuracy. Using qualitative content analysis, textual data was coded and categorized through an inductive approach with the help of Dedoose software. Inductive coding is a method whereby codes and themes are developed from the interpretation of raw data rather than starting with a predetermined set of codes.

Recurring ideas and dialogue were organized to highlight the most prominent themes and subcodes for each issue area. These themes were informed by recurring points raised by ETC members, often reflecting their experiences with state initiatives, challenges and visions for future improvements. Specific examples shared by members regarding state or institutional initiatives were also identified, alongside references to external sources related to these efforts.

To ensure the validity of the findings, the ETC members reviewed the themes and interpretations during the development of the paper; they were also given the opportunity to review drafts of the paper throughout the writing process. Their feedback helped ensure that the analysis accurately reflected the perspectives and priorities shared during the meetings.

It is important to note that the promising practices presented in the paper are not the result of formal decision-making by the ETC, but rather a synthesis of the most frequently discussed and emphasized themes that emerged from their ongoing conversations. These promising practices reflect the shared ideas that ETC members expressed during the meetings, with a focus on those themes that were particularly prominent across multiple sessions.

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March 2025