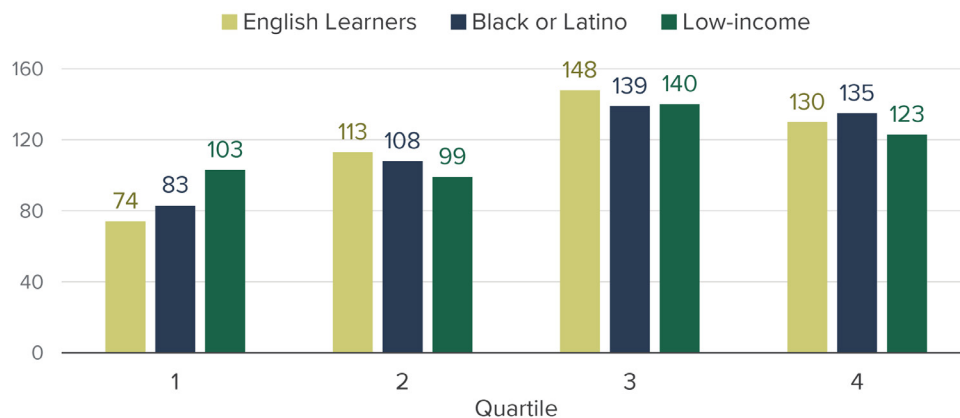


California School Districts and the Emergency Connectivity Fund

Many of the technological innovations California’s schools adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic are now permanent features of instruction and assessment. But barriers related to infrastructure, affordability, and digital literacy have persisted, particularly among certain populations. The Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) was a 2021 federal pandemic-relief program to improve digital access, whose mission emphasized school districts with higher shares of historically underserved populations, including English Learners (ELs), Black and Latino students, and low-income students. The program ends in June 2024. How well did it help to address California’s digital divide in education? We find:

- ▶ More districts with high shares of ELs, Black and Latino, or low-income students applied than those with lower shares.
- ▶ Districts with high shares of underserved students were approved for higher amounts of per-student funding than their counterparts.
- ▶ Internet connectivity was prioritized over devices across all districts.
- ▶ Early standardized testing outcomes show no correlation between districts’ learning loss/recovery and their ECF application rates.
- ▶ Districts serving vulnerable student populations estimate that between 9% and 15% of their students’ connectivity and device needs are still unmet.
- ▶ Several current federal and state programs can assist continued efforts to deliver connectivity and devices to students.

The majority of ECF applicants were historically underserved districts



Sources: Authors’ calculations using ECF data, 2021–22; CDE data, 2021–22.

Notes: There were 465 fully identifiable unique applicant districts common to these two data sources. Each set of columns shows the number of ECF applicant districts from that quartile of the respective population of California districts.

How well did ECF serve districts?

It may be too early to gauge the ECF's full effects—although the last application window closed in May 2022, districts have until June 2024 to complete their purchases of goods and services. If there is a connection between ECF and closing the digital divide at districts, it could be at least another year before student outcomes might reflect these efforts.

Nevertheless, the impressive response from districts serving high-needs students—as well as their success in securing substantial levels of per-student funding—are encouraging early indicators of its potential to reach its target audience. However, many students will still lack connectivity and/or devices after all purchases have been made.

ECF's process of approving and disbursing the funds could have been considerably streamlined. By the time ECF funds are fully spent, COVID-19 will be well into its fifth year.

Looking ahead

Several other federal and state programs continue to provide funding for improving internet connectivity for students and their families. The FCC's Digital Opportunity Fund, the Treasury's Coronavirus Capital Projects Fund, and the BEAD Program are together slated to provide more than \$60 billion over the next several years from the federal side. Closer to home, California's SB 156 emphasizes connecting historically high-needs communities throughout the state.

These ongoing programs could learn from ECF's outreach efforts, which successfully garnered the interest of school districts that could benefit the most. In contrast to other federal programs whose low take-up rates have left resources unused, ECF applicants eventually exhausted the fund.

Future programs to fund internet connectivity could benefit by streamlining administrative processes. The FCC's telehealth program would be an instructive model for any subsequent program. Although more limited in scope, it allocated \$200 million within the first several months of the pandemic.

Digital literacy is crucial for ensuring positive educational outcomes. Districts could benefit from sharing information on their best methods for establishing and maintaining effective communication with families. Providing culturally and linguistically competent support for EL, Black/Latino, and low-income students and their families is particularly important. Libraries, library consortia, and community-based organizations have provided helpful examples in this realm.

Supported with funding from the Sobrato Family Foundation.

Source: Adapted by Chansonette Buck from [California School Districts and the Emergency Connectivity Fund](#), by Joseph Hayes and Niu Gao.