

Closing the Digital Divide in K–12 Education: Policies and Practices to Ensure Access to AI and Emerging Technologies in U.S. Schools

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Abstract: The use of artificial intelligence (AI) and new technologies is quickly finding its way into the kindergarten through to 12th grade (K-12) classrooms and school functions of the United States. These may facilitate access, individualization, feedback and creativity. Nevertheless, they may also increase disparities when connectivity, hardware, and digital abilities as well as safe governance are uneven. The current narrative review is a synthesis of recent U.S.-focused policy and practice documents on bridging the digital divide and at the same time allowing equitable access to AI and other technologies. The evidence demonstrates the transition of a small devices and broadband frame to a larger model which incorporates three connected divides: digital access, digital design (educator capacity and time), and digital use (whether technology is used in meaningful learning or passive work). The review outlines 6 convergent trends, including maintaining universal connectivity outside of emergency programs; redefining the divide as access-design-use; creating educator capacity to design AI-ready learning; establishing responsible AI governance and procurement practices; reinforcing civil rights, disability inclusion and reducing bias; and establishing cross-sector partnerships to maintain progress. A theoretical framework is put forward to combine policy lever, school capacity and governance under an AI-ready model of digital equity.

Keywords: Digital equity; Digital divide; K–12; Artificial intelligence; Emerging technologies.

INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies found their way to the process of teaching and learning in kindergarten through to 12th grade (K-12) education. Over the years, the debate on the digital divide has largely involved the differences in access to devices and well-established internet connectivity to engage in technology-based learning spaces (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). The policies to bridge this gap have thus mainly focused on increasing the broadband infrastructure and supplying students with digital gadgets (Hayes & Gao, 2024). Though such initiatives have greatly enhanced connectivity in most school districts, technological change especially the development of artificial intelligence (AI) and other sophisticated digital devices has extended the digital divide well beyond mere access to infrastructure.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought renewed attention to digital inequalities in education, as the sudden transition to remote learning exposed disparities in access to reliable internet, devices, and digital skills. Many students, particularly those from low-income and rural backgrounds, faced significant barriers to participation, revealing the limitations of policies focused solely on infrastructure and hardware provision (Bartlett *et al.*, 2024; Arhimah *et al.*, 2025; State Educational Technology Directors Association [SETDA], 2025). These challenges demonstrated that access

alone is insufficient to ensure equitable digital learning outcomes.

In this study, artificial intelligence (AI) is defined broadly as computer-based systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, including adaptive learning platforms, automated feedback systems, and generative AI tools. The integration of AI into K–12 classrooms present new opportunities to enhance teaching and learning through personalized instruction, real-time feedback, and data-driven decision-making (Whalen & Mouza, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2024). However, it also introduces new equity concerns, as schools differ significantly in their capacity to adopt and effectively utilize these technologies. In many cases, educators lack the training and institutional support required to integrate AI meaningfully into instructional practices, which may inadvertently widen existing disparities.

Persistent digital inequalities in education gained new focus during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the sudden transition to distance learning in schools, students needed to have dependable access to internet at home (U.S. Department of Education, 2024; Hayes and Gao, 2024). This shift revealed significant differences between socioeconomic and geographic populations, especially low-income populations and rural populations. The lack of proper equipment or fast

internet was experienced by a great number of students, which supported the existing disparities in education and disclosed the ineffectiveness of policies based on connectivity and the provision of hardware only (Bartlett *et al.*, 2024; Arhimah *et al.*, 2025; State Educational Technology Directors Association [SETDA], 2025).

New technologies (AI) are finding their way into K-12 classrooms. New opportunities to improve teaching and learning can be created with the help of AI-enabled systems that may assist with personalized learning, automated feedback, and adaptive instruction (Whalen and Mouza, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Nonetheless, their merging also creates equity issues. The ability of schools to adapt and implement AI tools varies significantly and most teachers are not well-trained or oriented on their proper usage. The lack of proper support can accidentally contribute to the increase in gaps in the use of AI and educational results (Whalen and Mouza, 2023).

Policy debates now are focusing on a more comprehensive concept of digital equity that not only includes device and connectivity access. According to the present-day frameworks, the digital divide is a set of three dimensions that are interrelated and include digital access, digital design, and digital use (U.S. Department of Education, 2024; Jackson *et al.*, 2024). Digital access means the accessibility of infrastructure, devices and connectivity whereas digital design means whether or not educators have the time, training and resources to make meaningful technology-mediated learning experiences. The digital use emphasizes the application of technology in classrooms and whether the technology facilitates active and critical learning. Incorporating these three dimensions is crucial to make sure that the new technologies, such as AI, can enhance the learning results instead of supporting the existing inequities (Whalen and Mouza, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

Although there are considerable investments in policy on the infrastructure of broadband and the distribution of devices such as Chromebooks, tablets, and internet hotspot devices, disparities in digital learning opportunities continue to be observed in schools across K-12 in the U.S. (Hayes and Gao, 2024; SETDA, 2025). The increased adoption of AI and other emerging technologies has also made the digital equity

context even more complex by raising new concerns about the teacher capacity, responsible governance, and equitable use of technology (U.S. Department of Education, 2023; Whalen and Mouza, 2023). Most school systems do not have the policy frameworks, professional development patterns, and rule governance systems to have AI tools implemented in a manner that is equitable, ethical, and educationally useful (Jackson *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, the digital divide is becoming more and more of a disparity in technological access, as well as the capability of schools to effectively design and implement technology in learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

This narrative review will review the existing policies and practices that could lead to the closing of the digital divide and allow equitable access to AI and emerging technologies in U.S. K-12 education. In particular, the review summarises recent policy recommendations and studies to find the relevant trends that define digital equity, such as the attempts to maintain universal connectivity, the capacity of educators, and the creation of responsible governance structures of AI application in schools (Hayes & Gao, 2024; Roschelle *et al.*, 2024; Whalen & Mouza, 2023). Through the commentary on these developments, the review seeks to identify strategies that can be used in promoting equitable and effective implementation of AI in education and also offer a conceptual framework of how AI-ready K-12 systems could be achieved.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a narrative review methodology to consolidate existing literature and policy recommendations regarding digital equity and the incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) in U.S. K-12 education. A narrative review is especially appropriate for analyzing nascent and interdisciplinary subjects, utilizing insights derived from a synthesis of empirical research, policy documents, and theoretical frameworks.

Literature Search Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

Relevant literature was identified through searches of academic databases and policy repositories, including Google Scholar and education policy organization websites. The search focused primarily on literature published between 2021 and 2025, reflecting the rapid evolution of AI

technologies and recent digital equity initiatives following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sources were included if they: Focused on digital equity, digital divide, or technology access in K–12 education; Addressed AI or emerging technologies in educational contexts; Provided policy analysis, conceptual frameworks, empirical findings, or implementation guidance; Were produced by peer-reviewed journals, government agencies, or reputable education policy organizations

Key policy documents such as the U.S. Department of Education’s National Educational Technology Plan (2024) and reports from organizations including State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA), Digital Promise, and TeachAI were included because they significantly shape national conversations about AI and digital equity in schools.

Literature Analysis

The selected literature was reviewed and analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach. Recurring ideas, policy priorities, and implementation challenges were identified and grouped into broader thematic categories. Through this iterative process, major themes emerged that characterize current policy and practice discussions surrounding digital equity and AI adoption in U.S. K–12 education.

FINDINGS AND SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

Theme 1: From Emergency Connectivity to Sustainable Universal Access

One of the policy changes is the substitution of emergency programs such as the ECF with long-term sustainability. Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) played its role during the pandemic as it helped schools and libraries to offer broadband and linked gadgets to students (Broadcaster, 2021). Nevertheless, the program helped to meet the short-term needs but still left unmet needs. To give an example, according to a California policy brief, even with the ECF success, vulnerable population districts remained with 9% to 15% of unmet connectivity and devices (Hayes and Gao, 2024). Moreover, the program will be out of operation in June 2024, which puts a risk of a cliff in funding of those districts that have learned to depend on this program (Hayes and Gao, 2024).

Affordability is a factor that contributes to sustainability challenges. With short-term

programs coming to an end, the homework gap may become a problem again, because households will continue spending money on both internet access and replacement of devices (State Educational Technology Directors Association, 2025). It is especially a concern when it comes to AI-based tools, which not only demand consistent broadband but also more modern devices to be used effectively (Whalen and Mouza, 2023; SETDA, 2025). The potential solution could be provided by such initiatives as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) that includes an investment of 65 billion in broadband, however, even despite the expansion of infrastructures, the price and accessibility of devices become crucial factors (SETDA, 2025).

Moreover, there is the switch towards off-premises learning. This potential to extend the E-Rate program to include coverage of Wi-Fi hotspots at home might further be able to extend connectivity beyond the school building which is a requirement to maintain equitable learning (Federal Communications Commission, 2024). The essence of this change in policies is that learning today does not necessarily occur within the classroom and that AI tools prove to be most efficient when the students could be offered both at home and at school (Rubin *et al.*, 2022).

Theme 2. The Digital Divide Has Now Been Made Accessible, Designed, and Used

Over the past years, the classic concept of the digital divide that was mainly centered on device access and connectivity has changed. The National Educational Technology Plan of 2024 (NETP) changes the discussion to not only consider access, but the circumstances under which digital tools are learning instruments and brings in the notion of digital design and digital use (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Such a wider perception of digital divide is based on the cognizance that having access to technology itself is not enough without one applying it productively in teaching and learning.

The access gap is also still topical and includes all dimensions such as connection, devices, and content, not to mention the ability to use these tools to learn (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Nonetheless, the design divide and use divide have brought about the new dimensions. The design divide has to do with whether teachers have the time, preparation and support to design meaningful learning experiences with technology, and the use divide has to do with whether learners

make use of technology in an active, creative and critical way, or whether they merely perform passive activities like filling in digital worksheets or taking tests with technology (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). It was also found by research that the use of digital learning can be a very effective tool to increase the student engagement and problem-solving abilities, provided they are properly incorporated into the classroom setting (Arhimah *et al.*, 2025).

This broadening of the digital divide framework puts policy makers with the challenge of thinking about technology use in the same way as they think about technology access. It is significant to provide students with devices and broadband, but they are supposed to be used in a productive way to make learning meaningful. It is important to note that the technology provided to schools should encourage active learning, i.e., creativity, problem-solving and collaboration instead of automating low-level tasks or reinforcing the ability to memorize (Whalen and Mouza, 2023). Such a transition is essential in relation to AI-based tools that can allow for the most personalized and adaptive learning processes. Nevertheless, when AI systems are introduced to replace traditional practices, it might only continue the old inequalities rather than avert them.

This broadened concept of the digital divide is in line with wider conceptualizations of digital equity that rely on the necessary systems to establish equitable learning contexts. According to Digital Promise (2024), it is preferable to approach digital equity in a holistic manner, i.e., as a combination of access to devices and connectivity with digital literacy, community-based resources, and digital transformation leadership. These models show that educators and students need to be able to apply technology to facilitate learning, rather than merely to access it. The innovative STEM learning strategies which can encourage problem-solving and critical thinking in students are also getting facilitated by digital tools (Acquah *et al.*, 2025).

To ensure that AI is applied fairly, educational institutions should ensure they address the three dimensions of digital divide access, design, and use. It is possible that many districts can offer devices to students, but in case they use them to do basic tasks, the transformative potential of AI will be wasted. Conversely, educators will simply not make the most out of the tools unless they are sufficiently prepared to create learning experiences that enable efficient use of AI (U.S. Department of

Education, 2023; Whalen and Mouza, 2023). This will further support the necessity of a comprehensive strategy that includes both device and broadband access with AI literacy and meaningful instructional design to help students to interact with technology in ways that enhance their cognitive learning and equip them with a higher chance of working in an increasingly digital future profession.

The transition to an AI-enabled system of education is not only in the delivery of equipment and access to internet but ensuring that the equipment has a purpose other than playing video games or simple internet use, which will offer amenity to higher-order reasoning skills. AI tools can be used to increase personalized learning, yet they should be incorporated into instructional activities that promote engagement, critical thinking, and collaboration (Whalen and Mouza, 2023). The design of schools should also focus on equity-based design so that technology use is accessible to all students and especially to those whose historical communities were underserved. This means integrating AI resources into the curriculum in a manner that is inclusive, adaptive and empowering to a student of diverse backgrounds.

Theme 3: Educator Capacity and AI Literacy as Bottlenecks to Equity

A major underlying theme that has continued to be evident throughout all the evidence presented has been that educator capacity will be the major driver that determines whether the integration of AI and emerging technology will help reduce or exacerbate existing inequalities. This is particularly relevant since educators must be not only prepared to utilize these emerging technology tools effectively but also be prepared to utilize these technology tools effectively in order to improve student outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Educators have indicated that they are not sufficiently trained on the most effective means by which digital technology tools, including AI technology tools, can be utilized effectively in the teaching process. A digital equity report indicated that only 18% of educators strongly agree that their teachers are sufficiently trained to utilize technology effectively in the teaching process (Weaver, 2022). This is a major concern since it indicates a major gap that may hinder educators from being able to utilize these technology tools effectively. It is particularly disconcerting when

one considers that a new learning paradigm has been added by the integration of AI technology into the teaching process, which requires educators to be aware of the output provided by these technology tools, biases that may exist in these technology tools, and the importance of ensuring that privacy is maintained (Whalen & Mouza, 2023).

The toolkits provided by Teach AI (2023) on the most effective means by which educators can utilize AI technology effectively indicate that educators must not wait for the necessary planning and preparation that is required for the integration of these technology tools into the teaching process. This is particularly relevant since the “already here” reality has already set in; that is, students and educators have already started utilizing these technology tools, even though educators may not have been sufficiently trained or prepared for these technology tools or although the policies may not have been sufficiently integrated into the teaching process. This has created a major concern since there is a major likelihood that there will be a disparity in the utilization of these technology tools by educators in different classrooms. Moreover, the fact that educators may not be sufficiently trained on the most effective means by which these technology tools must be utilized effectively has created a major concern since educators may end up using these technology tools for harmful means, particularly in districts that are less resourced.

In response to the challenges identified above, the Teach AI toolkit suggests a step-by-step process for capacity building:

- i. Provide guidance to develop policies for the acceptable use of AI tools.
- ii. Develop organizational learning by offering professional development activities and creating tools to assess AI systems.
- iii. Scale up to achieve deeper transformation by integrating AI into instructional design to ensure student agency and critical thinking are prioritized (Whalen & Mouza, 2023).

The above process is also consistent with the access-design-use model suggested by the U.S. Department of Education (2024). The Department emphasizes the need to train educators to ensure that AI is used to enrich, not replace, quality learning.

Moreover, the need to develop AI literacy skills among teachers is also highlighted. Teachers need

to be capable not only of using AI tools but also of critically evaluating the results of the tools they are using. The lack of AI literacy skills among teachers is one of the major barriers to the successful implementation of AI tools in the classroom. Therefore, it is critical to ensure that teachers are provided with training to develop their AI literacy skills so that the implementation of AI can have a positive impact on equity (U.S. Department of Education, 2023; Whalen & Mouza, 2023).

Innovative pedagogical practices that incorporate digital technologies have been found to have a positive impact on STEM education and student learning outcomes (Acquah *et al.*, 2025).

As AI continues to progress as a tool for teaching and learning, educators will also continue to need to learn how to best apply these new technologies. This continued learning need is further evidence that it is essential to continue to support educators with the resources they will need to best apply AI in the classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2023; Whalen & Mouza, 2023).

Theme 4: Responsible AI Governance as an Essential Equity Strategy

As a result of the growing awareness of the power of AI to create new equity challenges for students, responsible AI governance is increasingly recognized as a fundamental equity strategy. Federal guidelines acknowledge that AI is a data-dependent tool that has the potential to create new privacy and security concerns that extend beyond the standard student data privacy issues. Accordingly, it is essential to address these data-related issues with the appropriate level of attention (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

School AI toolkits acknowledge that AI governance is essential for addressing learning-related issues such as plagiarism, bias, privacy infringement, loss of student autonomy, and over-reliance that can result in the erosion of critical thinking. However, AI toolkits also acknowledge that AI has the potential to create instructional benefits that support student learning, such as tutoring support for students and productivity support for educators. Therefore, it is essential to create guidelines that address these potential instructional benefits (Whalen & Mouza, 2023).

Legal compliance requirements are again emphasized. Toolkits summarize that schools are required to protect the education record privacy of students under FERPA, parental consent for

children under 13 under COPPA, and ensure that students with disabilities are not denied equal access under IDEA and Section 504 requirements (Whalen & Mouza, 2023). In addition, professional education associations are emphasizing the importance of procurement/adoption guides that are aligned with accessibility requirements and Universal Design for Learning (Ainley & Schulz, 2025).

State-level guidance is also emphasizing the importance of the aforementioned requirements. The human-centered AI guide developed for the state of Washington highlights the importance of human inquiry as a starting point for AI, as well as human reflection and empowerment as the endpoint, with the goal of keeping the human at the center of the equation (Lubin, 2025). A review of the state-level guidance from seven states identified common themes that address the need for a centralized approach to AI, which educators are looking for as a way to address the lack of clear expectations around AI use (Roschelle *et al.*, 2024). An effective governance structure is essential for the development and deployment of AI systems, which must balance the requirements for privacy and legal compliance (Utomi *et al.*, 2024).

There is a distribution issue with governance, as well. The rapid development of AI policies and training by high-capacity districts, with the lagging districts, threatens to create a new equity issue with AI use. This mirrors the digital equity framework, which considers leadership capacity as a domain of equity (Jackson *et al.*, 2024).

Theme 5: Civil rights, disability inclusion, and bias mitigation define the “equity test” for AI

It is important to note that AI has the potential to further widen the gaps in the education sector if it is not carefully implemented and designed while considering the aspect of equity. One of the main issues that have been raised by civil rights organizations and educators in the context of AI implementation in the education sector is the potential for biases in AI systems (Shafik, 2025). There is a possibility that biases in AI can arise from biased algorithms in the AI system. Such biases can further create a discriminatory environment for some students in the system, especially those from minority backgrounds (Babu, 2025). For example, facial recognition

technology that can be used in e-proctoring can fail for students from darker backgrounds and can lead to a biased assessment of the students (Babu, 2025). In addition, some AI-based technology can fail to address the needs of students who are differently abled and can further alienate these students.

In response to these challenges, the importance of disability inclusion and bias mitigation in AI governance in the education sector is becoming a necessity. The National Education Association (NEA) Task Force on AI (2024) highlights that there is a need for the development of AI systems that consider the needs of students with disabilities by ensuring that these systems are inclusive. This involves ensuring that the development of AI systems aligns with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which focuses on ensuring that the learning process is flexible and accessible for all students. According to the NEA Task Force on AI (2024), the development of AI systems must ensure that students with disabilities are included in the benefits that technology has to offer rather than being excluded.

The importance of evaluating AI tools for bias cannot be overemphasized. Whalen & Mouza (2023) highlight that without evaluating AI systems regularly, these systems are likely to maintain historical biases that may result in inequitable outcomes. Therefore, a justice-oriented approach is necessary for ensuring that these systems are fair and inclusive for all, thus ensuring that the harm caused by these systems is minimized.

Conceptual Integration: A Framework for AI-Ready Digital Equity

All five themes in the AI-Ready Digital Equity model aim to provide equitable access to AI in U.S. K-12 education. The digital infrastructure facilitates access to emerging technologies. The educator capacity and professional development theme empowers teachers to utilize AI effectively. The AI governance theme addresses privacy and bias considerations. The equity and inclusion theme guarantees that all students gain from AI in their learning. The model establishes an effective and equitable system for AI integration. It lays the groundwork for AI readiness in digital equity within U.S. K-12 schools.

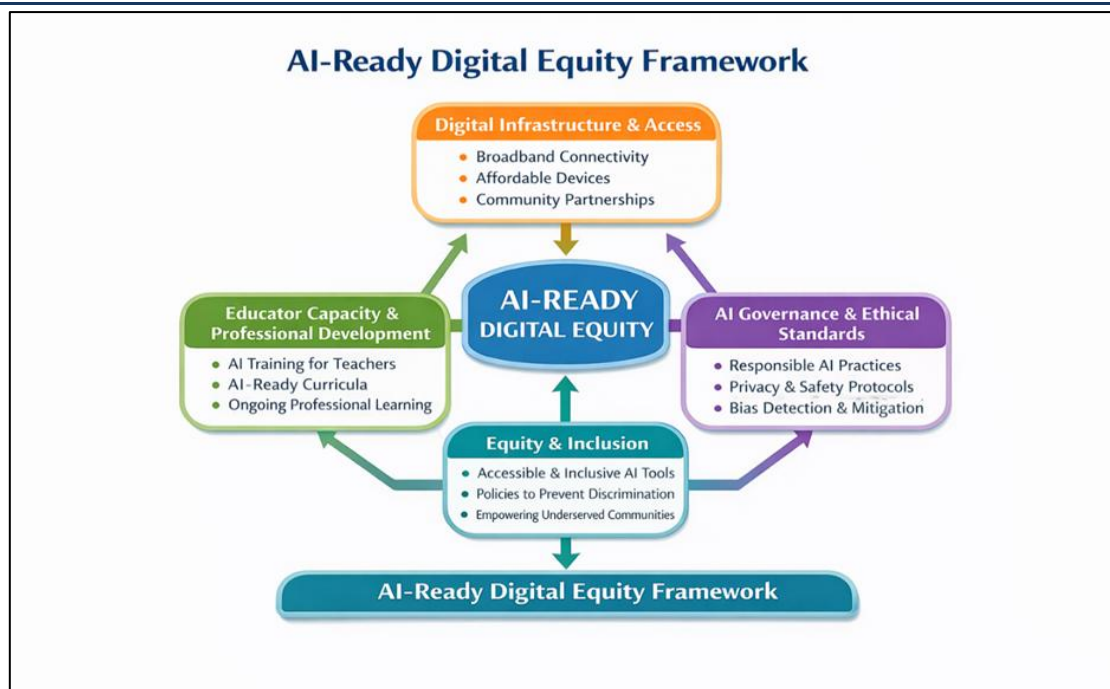


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of AI-Ready Digital Equity in U.S. K–12 Education (Author’s construct, 2026)

This integrated framework emphasizes that the successful integration of AI into education is not merely a technical challenge but a systemic one. It requires the collaboration of all stakeholders; students, teachers, policymakers, and communities to create a sustainable, inclusive ecosystem where AI serves as a tool for equity and transformation, not just innovation.

CONCLUSION

The literature reviewed indicates that addressing the K–12 digital divide in the context of artificial intelligence requires moving beyond a narrow focus on broadband expansion and device provision. Instead, it necessitates a systemic approach that integrates digital infrastructure, educator capacity, instructional design, and responsible governance within an AI-ready framework. While emergency connectivity initiatives demonstrated that rapid improvements in access are achievable, they also exposed persistent inequities and the instability of progress when such efforts are not sustained through long-term policy commitments.

Furthermore, the growing integration of AI technologies introduces additional complexities, including concerns related to equity, ethical use, privacy, and the potential emergence of new forms of digital inequality. Without adequate policy frameworks, educator preparedness, and governance structures, the adoption of AI risks

reinforcing existing disparities rather than reducing them.

For the purpose of the achievement of digital equity, the integration of AI technology into the K–12 educational system necessitates a comprehensive approach. The “AI-ready digital equity” model includes the achievement of universal access, educators, quality learning, as well as the integration of responsible governance within the educational system that holds the promise to achieve the integration of emerging technologies with the highest potential to achieve quality learning for all.

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