



700 Raymond Avenue, Suite 180  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55114  
651-645-2277  
[literacymn.org](http://literacymn.org)

## Executive Summary

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) selected Literacy Minnesota to create a Community Needs Assessment Report (the Report) that identifies and assesses actions taken to close the digital divide across the state since March 2020. The project was funded by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act and completed in December 2020.

[The Report](#) draws on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, extensive outreach, an original Digital Equity Community Needs Assessment survey (Survey) and Literacy Minnesota's nearly 50 years of work in Adult Basic Education. The Report answers the following questions:

- I. What counties have high digital access, economic, education and English language learning needs?*
- II. How have organizations adapted to the pandemic and addressed digital access needs in their communities, who do they serve, and which counties are served?*
- III. How would a statewide Digital Navigator Program complement available resources and sustainably solve persistent problems?*

The Report documents:

- A ranking of Minnesota's 87 counties with respect to high-priority access, economic, education and language needs identified by MDE; a county map can be found [here](#).
- Nobles County, a nonmetro county located in southwest Minnesota, is the only county in Minnesota where all high-priority needs are present, an additional 35 counties have at least three of six high-priority needs and 84 counties have at least one high-priority need.
- A Survey sent to broadband providers, community organizations, government agencies, libraries, nonprofits and schools with 294 responses found that most service providers saw a decrease in participants due to digital equity issues despite adding services.
- Although rural counties face barriers to digital equity not found in urban counties, more organizations address the digital divide per capita in nonmetro counties than metro counties in Minnesota, and more digitally disenfranchised people live metro counties.
- A statewide Digital Navigator Program in Minnesota would require an estimated 200 digital navigators hosted at community-based organizations, libraries and other trusted organizations, and would serve an estimated 80,000 participants in need of navigation.
- The role of the digital navigator is to empower participants in the Digital Navigation Program by connecting them to available community resources, providing them one-on-one digital literacy instruction and helping participants set and achieve their goals.
- Evaluating the efficacy of the statewide Digital Navigator Program would require an equity lens, survey Program participants, track progress using Northstar Digital Literacy assessments and utilize third-party analysts when possible.

The Report finds that a statewide Digital Navigator Program represents one way to address the digital divide in Minnesota. The Report recommends a Digital Equity Initiative that would connect people in need to a device, the internet and digital literacy skills. The Initiative would reduce civic, economic and educational disparities across the state. Diverse and divergent stakeholders would have to be brought together to coordinate the Digital Equity Initiative, and its leader must have the capacity to bring broadband providers, community-based organizations, corporations, libraries and schools into dialogue with government officials about solving problems in their communities including the problem of digital disenfranchisement, which the crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession have aggravated, exacerbated and expanded.