August 3, 2020

Governor Kelly

Senator Wagle        Speaker Ryckman
Senator Denning     Rep. Hawkins
Senator Hensley     Rep. Sawyer
Senator McGinn      Rep. Waymaster

The Kansas Association of School Boards supports efforts to provide affordable broadband internet access to unserved and underserved students and families, including but not limited to the SPARK Executive Committee’s proposal to allocate $60 million in CARES Act funding to improving broadband internet buildout and access.

KASB asked our member Boards of Education about the biggest challenges they faced regarding providing continuous learning when school buildings closed at the end of the 2019-20 school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic and in their plans to reopen schools this fall. Following the primary concerns about health, safety and sanitation, our boards tell us the next biggest challenge is student access to broadband internet service.

A June 2020 study by Common Sense Media entitled, “Closing the K-12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning” found more than 156,000 Kansas students – one-third of the 500,000 students enrolled in K-12 schools – lack adequate access to broadband internet service.

Many of those 156,000 students are your constituents. In rural areas of the state broadband access is limited by geographic isolation and the high cost of extending service to the most isolated farms and homes. In urban areas, low-income students lack access because their families cannot afford broadband internet; instead, they rely on cellphone service for their connections. This digital divide between internet haves and have-nots is also referred to as the “homework gap.”

Many Kansas boards of education are planning for the possibility of having to deliver at least a portion of their curriculum online this coming school year because of continuing local implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their patrons and the Kansas State Board of Education expect districts to provide a much more robust online curriculum than the temporary continuous learning plans school districts developed to finish out the final weeks of the 2019-20 school year and our boards are committed to providing rigorous content to prepare all Kansas students for academic and career success. Much of that rigor, however, will depend on students having access to broadband internet to complete online lessons.

KASB’s members are working to bridge the “homework gap” by providing internet hotspots and wireless-enabled devices to their students who do not have broadband access. Those efforts are
expensive, however, and they are only a **short-term solution**. Ultimately, Kansas students and families would be better served by the broadband access buildout envisioned by efforts such as the SPARK Committee’s recommendation to spend $50 million on funding to expand **broadband infrastructure** to reach areas currently unable to access minimally adequate services as well as the $10 million proposed to help the most vulnerable populations. As you know, however, the CARES Act funds must be expended by the end of the calendar year so prompt legislative action is needed to begin the process of connecting Kansas students and their families to the technology resources they need for a high quality education.

Thank you for your service to the state of Kansas; please do not hesitate to contact KASB if we may be of assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,

Leah Fliter  
Director of Governmental Relations  
Kansas Association of School Boards