

Digital Skills in Pandemic Times: How State Policymakers Can Help Workers and Businesses Adapt in a Changing Economy

The Covid-19 pandemic has illustrated with vivid clarity how important it is for people to have digital literacy skills. From the workplace to the classroom and beyond, being able to use digital tools effectively is fundamental to success. For American businesses, the pandemic has accelerated a technological transformation that was underway even before the crisis struck. In many industries [digital skills are now entry-level competencies](#) for new hires and incumbent workers alike. Workers in positions ranging from frontline jobs to white-collar roles are being asked to quickly adapt to new tools and technologies.

To succeed in this rapidly changing environment, **workers need broad-based digital problem-solving skills that equip them to learn a wide variety of today's technologies and navigate continued changes in the future.** But [at least 48 million U.S. workers](#) lack these foundational digital skills, and even more lack access to the high-quality training which would empower them to increase their skills to meet future technological shifts. Many of these same individuals also lack high-speed internet access and up-to-date digital devices – often referred to as the other two legs of the digital inclusion stool – which can further hamper their efforts to build digital skills.

While digital skill gaps exist in every demographic group, [workers of color are disproportionately affected](#), in large part due to structural factors that are the product of longstanding inequities in American society. Historically, public policy decisions have played a key role in **forming** skill gaps, including those that are racially inequitable. Therefore, public policies must now be an integral part of the **solution**.

As the US continues to navigate the economic turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic and recession, it is imperative that policymakers invest in an [inclusive economic recovery](#). Key principles for this recovery should include: Investing first in those workers and businesses who have been hurt the most; eliminating structural racism in skills policies; and ensuring that workers have opportunities for sustainable careers rather than just a job. In addition, National Skills Coalition (NSC) has identified “Digital access and learning for all working people at home and on the job,” as [one of eight top policy goals](#) for an inclusive recovery.

To this end, NSC and its network of state workforce and education policy advocates have laid out a set of **10 immediately actionable recommendations** that can be implemented by state policymakers seeking to improve digital skills. As detailed below, these recommendations are divided between: 1) Those that are revenue-neutral and can be accomplished via the executive branch (governor's office, state agencies); and 2) those that require legislative action and additional investment.

Revenue-neutral Administrative Policy Recommendations

1. ***Issue guidance on how state agencies and local partners can support digital inclusion via existing federal programs.*** In recent months, several federal agencies have [issued policy memoranda](#) or other guidance explaining how various federal funds can be used to support digital inclusion. State agencies can amplify these announcements and encourage local education and workforce providers to take advantage of them by issuing their own guidance. In particular, states can highlight the use of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment & Training (SNAP E&T) funds, and US Department of Labor workforce funding for digital inclusion activities.
2. ***Encourage the use of existing Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds and state adult education funds for digital skill-building.*** WIOA can support workers in building digital skills via two avenues – Title I workforce funds, and Title II adult education funds. In particular, [digital literacy is designated as an “allowable activity”](#) under Title II. States can encourage their existing adult education providers to [build out the digital literacy components](#) of their adult basic education, high school equivalency, and adult English language classes. Given the significant number of people of color served by the WIOA Title II system, this is especially important in helping to overcome existing racial inequities in access to digital skills. States can also consider how their Title II state leadership dollars can be used to support digital literacy via professional development activities for adult education staff, to help them build their own skills as well as to more effectively support adult learners. In addition, both Title I and Title II providers can be encouraged to incorporate digital skills as a component of Integrated Education and Training (IET) programs. The IET model combines instruction in basic skills such as reading, math, or digital skills simultaneously with industry- or occupation-specific training. States can incentivize greater use of the IET model by helping providers understand how they can receive credit for participants’ Measurable Skill Gains under WIOA performance metrics. Finally, states also can consider how *state-specific* adult education funding can be used to strengthen digital learning opportunities.
3. ***Capitalize on the availability of federal Covid relief funds such as the CARES Act.*** Federal relief funds to states provide robust opportunities for states to support digital inclusion.¹ [Several states have already done so](#), though to date these have focused more on younger students and on other aspects of inclusion, rather than skill-building. For example, New Jersey is using \$115 million in CARES Act funds, Ohio has dedicated \$50 million, and Texas plans to use \$200 million – all to support devices and broadband access for K-12 students. At the municipal level, some cities have been more ambitious; San Antonio is using \$27 million for a broad array of activities including [digital navigators](#). While CARES Act funds must be allocated by December 31, 2020, other Covid relief packages are currently under consideration in Congress and additional funding will likely be approved in the future, providing more opportunities for state

¹ In most cases, this can be done without legislative action, though in some cases state officials may need to obtain legislative approval.

action. States should consider using these federal funds to support digital skill-building for unemployed workers and others with digital skills gaps, via their public workforce, higher education, and/or adult education systems.

4. **Ensure that digital literacy skill-building is an explicitly permitted use of state Incumbent Worker Training (IWT) funds.** [Thirty states have allocated state-level funding](#) to support training for incumbent workers. *(This is completely separate from federal WIOA incumbent worker training funds, which are not part of this recommendation.)* However, many of these state IWT funds do not explicitly note whether they can be used to support either foundational digital literacy skills or more advanced occupation-specific digital literacy. States should remedy this situation by adjusting language in administrative policies (or via legislative change, if necessary) to affirm the eligibility of digital literacy activities and encourage such efforts.
5. **Facilitate partnerships between education and workforce providers and the public library system to support digital skill-building.** The federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) makes numerous grants to library systems each year to support a wide variety of activities, including workforce development and adult education. States can consider how they might better access these important federal funds by building stronger connections among the state labor agency, education agency, and state library officials in pursuit of shared digital literacy goals. States can look to this US Department of Education [“Dear Colleague” letter](#) as a starting point to spark collaboration, and can also consider how state teamwork can provide a model for local education and workforce providers to form similar partnerships with their public libraries. Given the important role that many libraries play in serving marginalized communities, states should also explore how these collaborations can be structured to help to close racial equity gaps.
6. **Analyze existing datasets to understand whether existing digital learning methods produce equitable outcomes for learners.** States already collect substantial data about the outcomes of education and workforce programs via the WIOA Title II National Reporting System, State Longitudinal Data Systems, and other mechanisms. However, this data is not always analyzed with an eye toward how digital aspects of the programming (such as online learning formats) might affect participant outcomes or correlate with participant demographics. States should capitalize on this trove of existing data by analyzing key variables to understand how programs are currently functioning in this respect, and then issue guidance or provide technical assistance on how programs’ online offerings might be further improved to narrow digital skill gaps, including racial equity gaps. (Additional information on using workforce data to address racial inequities is available in NSC’s [The Roadmap to Racial Equity: An Imperative for Workforce Advocates](#).)
7. **Create or revise state strategic plans and initiatives to include digital literacy goals** that align with governors’ [postsecondary credential attainment goals](#) or other educational attainment strategies and metrics. By incorporating digital literacy as part of existing

efforts, states will ensure that it will be institutionalized as a priority, and will create a natural avenue for continued measurement of progress, as well as discussion about how education and workforce policy can support digital skill-building. Given that 30 states with postsecondary goals have also set specific goals to reduce racial inequities in student outcomes, incorporating digital skills into postsecondary goals can also help to track and assess progress toward remedying racial inequities in this arena. Finally, states may also wish to consider how their broader efforts to [develop measures of quality](#) for postsecondary credentials can be applied in the specific case of digital skills and credentials.

Legislative Recommendations that Require Additional Investment:

8. ***Introduce state-level Digital Equity Act or Digital Upskilling Grants legislation.*** Federal legislation known as the [Digital Equity Act](#) has been introduced in Congress, and National Skills Coalition [has proposed](#) a new federal investment in Digital Upskilling Grants. Even without waiting for federal action, either proposal could be used as a template for new state-level investment in digital inclusion. For example, a new Digital Literacy Upskilling grant program could allocate funds to education and workforce providers to develop and implement high quality digital skill-building programs that respond to industry and worker needs. Funds could be used to contextualize digital skills instruction for specific industries, increase instructor professional development, and support training costs of incoming and incumbent workers. Funds could also include a state set-aside to provide technical assistance to program providers or evaluate emerging digital literacy program models. To boost support for new investment in a tight budget environment, states may wish to consider how new digital upskilling investments can help meet existing mandates, such as [state postsecondary attainment goals](#) or racial equity goals.
9. ***Research, develop, and invest in a scalable, low-cost digital assessment and aligned learning technologies.*** Lack of standardized and widely recognized assessment tools and associated credentials is a major current challenge for employers and workers alike. (A few states have begun to tackle the issue by designating the [Northstar Digital Literacy Assessment](#) as a valid measure of digital skill gain for state-funded adult education programs.) To remedy this issue, states should work in partnership with local employers to develop tools that will empower them to assess the foundational competencies of their incumbent workforce. This effort can be advanced as part of the broader IWT policy changes described above, or as a stand-alone activity. If digital assessments result in a credential, states can use [recommended standards](#) to ensure that it is a quality credential that has value in the labor market.
10. ***Allocate state rapid-response funds to help disconnected workers build digital skills.*** These existing state funds are typically dispensed through state labor agencies and used to help reskill workers who have been recently laid off or displaced. Dedicating a portion of these funds to digital skills training would improve individuals' employability and speed up their reconnection to work. States should consider how to incorporate

digital skill-building as a part of rapid-response activities, including by offering occupational digital literacy as part of other technical, industry-specific training.²

To learn more about how National Skills Coalition can support your state in advancing these policy recommendations, contact Melissa Johnson, Managing Director, State Strategies, at melissaj@nationalskillscoalition.org.

² Learn more about this approach in NSC's publication [Boosting Digital Literacy in the Workplace](#).