i-Ready®

A Window into the Digital Divide

Early distance-learning data provides a window into the persistent equity gap and low-income students' appetite for digital learning opportunities.
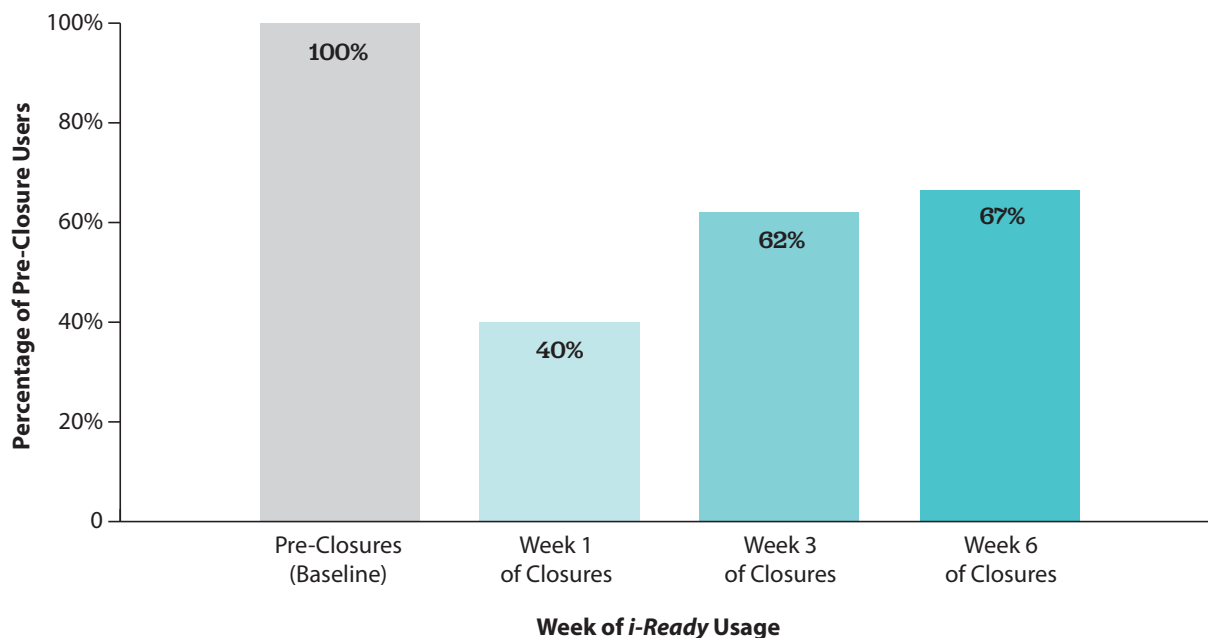
As schools across the country work through early bumps of distance learning, student data is shining a new light on the digital access divide. Our research into some early distance-learning data shows that our country still has an enormous digital equity gap to close.

Use of digital learning dropped—and recovered—across the board.
i-Ready is one of many tools that were originally built for the classroom but are now being used to facilitate distance learning in the wake of extended school closures. After giving districts a few weeks to settle in to new distance-learning routines, our research team took a look at *i-Ready* usage patterns across the country. When student learning moved from the classroom to the home, we immediately saw a decline in overall student use of the program. New routines, new schedules, and the absence of the traditional school setting drove this significant drop. As students and schools settled in to new routines and retooled for distance learning, some of that access recovered in subsequent weeks.
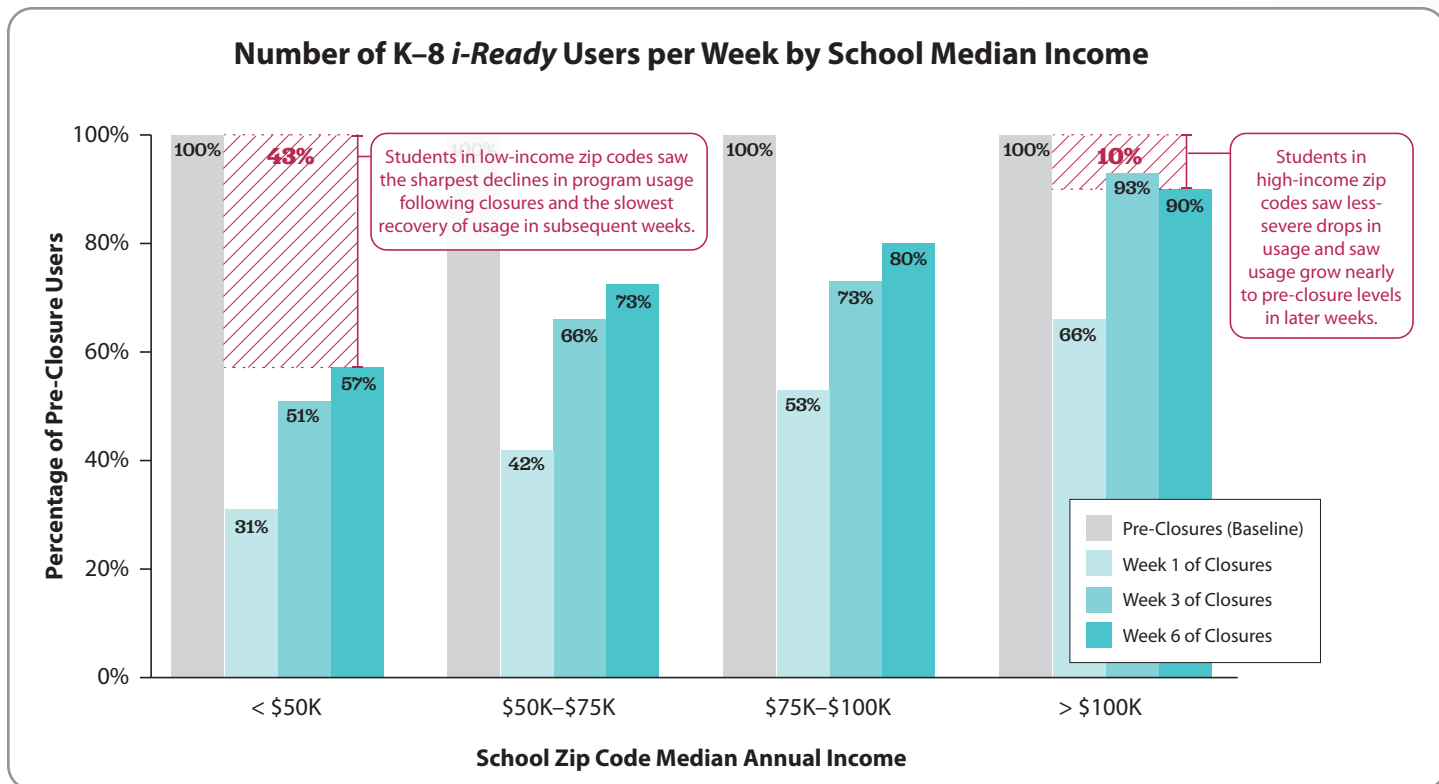
i-Ready *serves roughly one quarter of K–8 students in all 50 states across America. The program connects assessment data to actionable reporting for educators and delivers engaging mathematics and reading instruction for students.*

Number of K–8 *i-Ready* Users per Week

Bar chart — Percentage of Pre-Closure Users (y-axis) vs. Week of *i-Ready* Usage (x-axis):
- Pre-Closures (Baseline): 100%
- Week 1 of Closures: 40%
- Week 3 of Closures: 62%
- Week 6 of Closures: 67%

Recovering usage differs dramatically based on community economics.

A closer look at *i-Ready*'s usage data reveals more troubling patterns in both the drop-off and the recovery. The drop-off in usage for students in low-income zip codes was much greater than the drop for students in higher-income zip codes—usage for students in low-income zip codes fell to between 30 percent and 40 percent of pre-closure usage levels. Use fell in high-income zip codes as well, but by far less, presumably mitigated by greater device and internet availability.

Number of K–8 *i-Ready* Users per Week by School Median Income

Students in low-income zip codes saw the sharpest declines in program usage following closures and the slowest recovery of usage in subsequent weeks.

Students in high-income zip codes saw less-severe drops in usage and saw usage grow nearly to pre-closure levels in later weeks.

Legend: Pre-Closures (Baseline); Week 1 of Closures; Week 3 of Closures; Week 6 of Closures

Y-axis: Percentage of Pre-Closure Users
X-axis: School Zip Code Median Annual Income

Data:
- < $50K: 100%, 31%, 51%, 57% (43%)
- $50K–$75K: 100%, 42%, 66%, 73%
- $75K–$100K: 100%, 53%, 73%, 80%
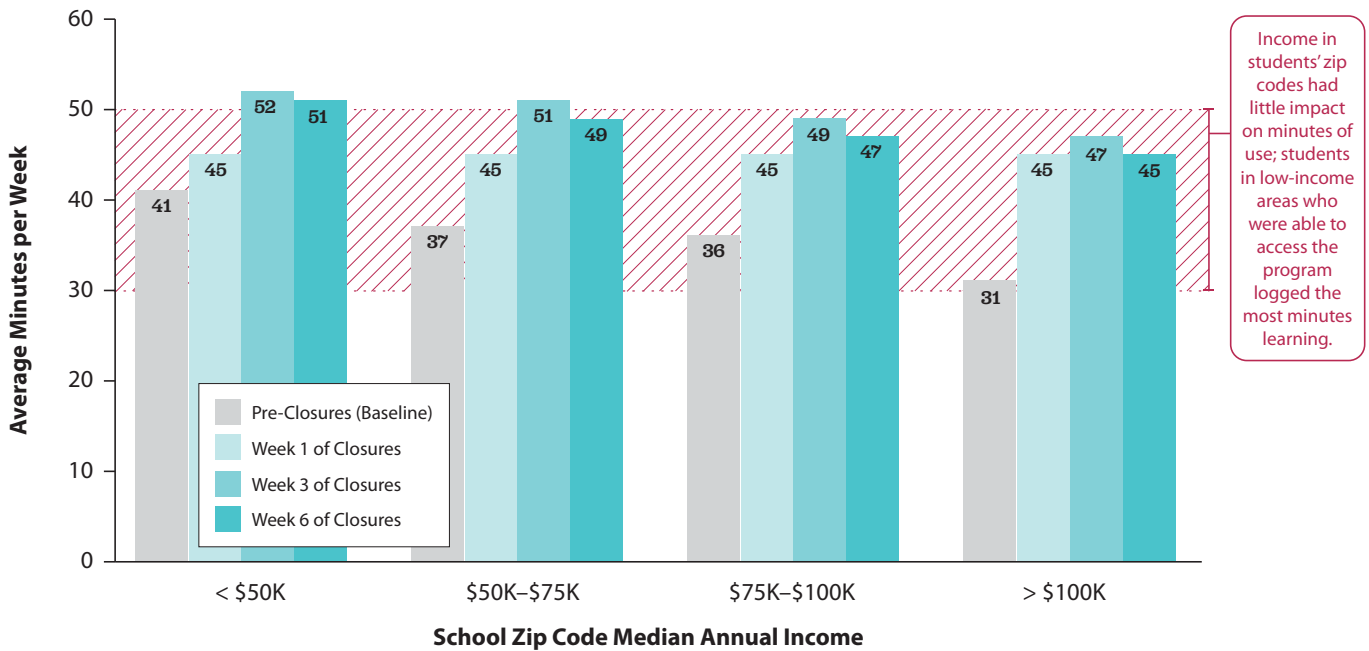- > $100K: 100%, 66%, 93%, 90% (10%)

As school systems developed new support strategies in the face of school closures and students settled in to new routines, we saw usage levels gradually recover across all income groups. In low-income zip codes, however, usage levels recovered to just a fraction of pre-closure access levels. By Week 6 of school closures, the number of users from the lowest income group was less than 60 percent of what was observed from that same group prior to closures. Over the same time, students in the highest-income zip codes experienced usage levels that nearly mirrored their averages before schools closing.

Average learning time across income groups—a bittersweet pattern in the findings

While the precipitous drop-off in usage and the underwhelming recovery highlight how difficult it can be for some students in low-income areas to access digital learning, we did find a thin silver lining in these students' usage. Students in low-income zip codes undoubtedly struggled to access the program, but those who were able to access *i-Ready* spent more minutes in the program than their peers in higher-income zip codes. These students in low-income zip codes, on average, tipped just above *i-Ready*'s recommended weekly usage of 30–50 minutes per subject per week. With access to devices and internet, students in low-income areas embraced digital learning opportunities.

**Average Time Spent in *i-Ready* per Week in Grades K–8
by School Median Income**

Income in students' zip codes had little impact on minutes of use; students in low-income areas who were able to access the program logged the most minutes learning.

Following closures, student usage increased across all income groups—likely a result of greater reliance on digital learning tools in extended learning plans. Unlike patterns in household access to the program, students' minutes logged in the program were relatively uniform across income groups and trend slightly higher for students in low-income zip codes.

Where do we go next?

i-Ready is one of many programs supporting schools' distance-learning plans. While one program's data cannot tell the complete story of digital learning inequities, this snapshot is likely a reflection of the broader problem. Many districts have invested in innovative programs to bring digital learning into their schools, but these efforts have not solved community-level inequities in device and internet access.

Future efforts will need to solve for all three pieces of the problem: quality programs, widespread device availability, and expanded internet access. Solving for all three factors together will likely require efforts beyond the school system—community, civic, corporate, and philanthropic forces working together to bring the requisite pieces together to create a more equitable environment for students. We are encouraged by the dozens of examples we have seen across the country of schools working with communities and companies to bridge this gap. We see this shared commitment sparking innovation as districts dispatch hundreds of WiFi-equipped school busses to rural and low-income neighborhoods in places like Arkansas and Austin, Texas to help students access remote learning. We see corporations leaping into action to offer free internet access and devices to ensure learning continues. We are inspired by the urgency we see in places like New York City, as teams work to distribute 300,000 devices to students, prioritizing those living in foster care, in shelters, and in public housing. Efforts like these, paired with the work of extraordinary educators everywhere, provide a portrait of future successes.