



COMPUTERS FOR YOUTH

*Review of the Administration's Telecommunications Infrastructure
and Economic Development Study*

**New York City Council Hearing
May 2nd, 2005**

**Testimony by Elisabeth Stock, President & Co-Founder
Computers for Youth (www.cfy.org)**

Thank you to the committee for allowing me to testify.

My name is Elisabeth Stock and I am the President and Co-Founder of Computers for Youth – a New York City nonprofit dedicated to bringing technology to low-income New York City communities. I am here today to commend this committee, EDC, DoITT and SBS for their study. Of the three main issues in the study, I would like to focus on **broadband accessibility**.

First, let me give you a little background about myself. I trained as an engineer at MIT, and served for 5 years on MIT's Board of Trustees. Then while a White House Fellow in 1997, I created a national program to distribute surplus government computers to schools. I then returned to New York and, in 1999, co-founded Computers for Youth. We have since become one of the nation's leaders in home access to information technology.

Let me tell why I think technology is so important for low-income communities – especially in terms of helping students learn. Fact: By the time children turn 18, they have spent only 13% of their waking hours in the classroom. What does this mean? It means if we really want to close the

learning gap between low-income children and their more affluent peers, we must reach beyond the classroom walls to improve children's learning environment *at home*. How can we do that? CFY believes that technology is the best way to achieve this goal—a home computer with Internet access not only inspires students to learn, but it also can help parents become more effective learning partners.

CFY's program selects public schools serving low-income 6th, 7th and 8th graders and then offers computers to *all* the students in selected grades. Our computers are desktops Pentium III (or better) donated to us by our corporate partners, such as Goldman Sachs and Time Warner, and refurbished by CFY staff. All the students who participate in our program not only receive a CFY computer loaded with educational software, but also initial dial-up Internet access, training, tech support and bilingual web content. Once the computers go home, CFY operates school-based programs that leverage the technology to increase parental involvement in children's learning, and to connect the learning that happens at home with what happens in the classroom. You are all welcome to come to our partner school in Tremont this coming Saturday to see us train 100 families on the CFY computer they then will take home.

Who have we served? In 5½ years, we have distributed 5,500 computers and trained 11,000 students, parents and teachers. The families we have reached live in East New York, East Flatbush/Brownsville, East Harlem, Washington Heights, the South Bronx, and Tremont. Most of these families are immigrants – from Central and South America and the West Indies.

CFY's impact has been huge. 74% of students have reported their CFY computer helped them do better in school; 75% reported their CFY computer made them try harder in school; and 71% of parents reported using their CFY computer to help their children with homework.

* * *

Internet access is of great value to our families:

(1) Parents use the Internet to help their children learn. For example, Mrs. Jones helped her daughter find information on-line about human body parts for her science class.¹ Mrs. Metcalf asked her granddaughter, who really liked to write, to research her favorite authors on the Internet and try to emulate their writing styles. While examples like these can be found in families of all income levels, what makes them so meaningful for low-income families is that these families have few other alternatives for accessing the Internet: (a) Many do not have a library close by; (b) Those who do, have to wait a very long time to use the library's computer for only a ½ hour time slot; and (c) In many of our neighborhoods, having Internet access at home means children do not have to walk dangerous streets to do their school research.

(2) Parents use the Internet to bank, pay bills and shop – and this saves them money and time. Again, while this is true for families of any income level, it is more pronounced in CFY households. Most of our families are on tight budgets and using the Internet to find the lowest price for a product can be especially important. The goods CFY families buy on the Internet are as varied as clothes, light bulbs, televisions, and school supplies. In terms of using the Internet to

¹ All names of CFY family members are pseudonyms to protect their identity.

save time, again this is particularly meaningful for low-income families. Many CFY parents hold down two or more jobs and do not have much time to do activities with their children. Now, the time they save by banking and shopping online can be spent with their kids.

(3) Families – especially immigrant families -- use the Internet to communicate with relatives in their native countries. They no longer have to wait weeks for written letters to go back and forth. Several CFY families have also called the help desk to ask about using Voice over IP to get free unlimited long distance.

(4) Many parents use their home Internet access to stay connected to school. For example, last month, Mrs. Rodriguez's daughter Marta was sick at home for a week after a serious asthma attack. Marta's teacher emailed school work each day so Marta would not fall behind. While this story could also happen in affluent communities, it is more meaningful for families like Mrs. Rodriguez's for whom crises are often much more destabilizing and can lead to children being absent from school. I should add that staying connected to school is not just for the children. Several parents are using their CFY computer to take on-line college classes themselves.

* * *

I would now like to turn my attention to the data CFY has collected on Internet and broadband penetration. I believe doing so can help us better weigh the numerous obstacles low-income families face in adopting broadband.

First the statistics: Two months after receiving their computers, around 65% of CFY families have Internet access at home (compared with 50% of low-income families nation-wide) and 24% of CFY families have broadband access (compared with 10% of low-income families nation-wide).²

Clearly participating in the CFY program does increase the number of low-income families who adopt both Internet service and broadband. This is no surprise, since CFY removes three of the primary obstacles to Internet adoption: having a home computer, knowing how to use it, and knowing where get help.

Still, even with these barriers removed, CFY families adopt Internet access at a much lower rate than high-income families. Let's compare: About 65% of CFY families have Internet access at home, compared with 90% of high-income families, and about 24% of CFY families have broadband at home compared with about 55% of high-income families.³

It seems to me that the only significant barrier left is the price of Internet access. It also appears that this price barrier has an even greater effect on Internet adoption than the other barriers combined! Therefore, I argue that if low-income families are ever to catch up to their more affluent peers, we must focus on lowering the price of Internet access to make it affordable for

² The 65% figures comes from averaging what we heard from parents (75%) and what we heard from students (53%). In phone interviews conducted 1-2 months after receiving their CFY computers (n=39), 75% of parents said they had Internet access at home. (CFY called more than 200 families to get these 39 responses.) In surveys administered about one month after receiving their CFY computer (n=382), 53% of students said they had Internet access at home (29% dial-up and 24% broadband) and 14% said they did not know if they had Internet access at home. The national figure comes from Mark Cooper, *Expanding the Digital Divide & Falling Behind on Broadband: Why a Telecommunications Policy of Neglect is Not Benign* (2004) .

³ The national figure comes from Mark Cooper (see prior footnote). In this example, high-income families are defined as those with annual incomes above \$100,000.

all.⁴ Doing so will help New York City improve children's learning environment *at home* and thereby narrow the learning gap between low-income children and their more affluent peers.

Story: Let me leave you with a story. During a focus group with a number girls in the CFY program, I asked if any of them used their CFY computer to learn. Without missing a beat, they all said "nope." I asked again, "Not one of you uses your computer for learning?" and they all said "nope." So I picked out one girl, Tanya, and asked her to tell me what she did the prior day on her CFY computer. Tanya said "Well yesterday in English class, we learned about Maya Angelou and read one of her poems. I really liked it so when I got home, I went online on my computer and found out that Maya Angelou had written many many poems and books too. I was even able to read a chapter of one of her books online. It was great because I want to write books when I get older." I was amazed. I said to Tanya, "but that's learning" and she corrected me: "No it's not, that's fun."

⁴ *Ibid.* Low-income families, in this case, are defined as those with annual incomes below \$30,000.