

# Colorado Gears Up For Online Learning With Digital Access Push — And One Victory for Undocumented Families

By Jenny Brundin - July 15, 2020

More Colorado children have the devices they need for remote learning now compared to when the coronavirus pandemic started, but fewer families have access to the internet.

Advocates and education and workforce development officials say stimulus funding from Congress could address the state's digital divide, improve students' ability to join online classes during the pandemic and speed up the economic recovery.

A survey by the Colorado Education Initiative at the outset of the pandemic found an estimated 53,000 students in Colorado lacked devices. It found 66,000 families didn't have reliable internet at home. Two-thirds of students without internet access are Hispanic, according to [a Colorado State University study](#).

CEI president Rebecca Holmes said many school districts used emergency funds, reserves and relief dollars to get devices to children.

"But now they have ongoing technological repair needs that even our largest districts aren't designed to take care of and our smallest districts will struggle to address," Holmes said.

## The economic downturn posed another challenge

And as the economy took a dive and people lost jobs, some families who had internet had to drop it, she said. She estimates 10 percent or roughly 90,000 students still lack an internet connection.

Lee Wheeler-Berliner, managing director of the Colorado Workforce Development Council, said the issue is a critical one as the state's economy tries to recover.

"With the digital divide, if we cannot close that and create technological access and equipment and education for all individuals throughout our state, we will suffer significant economic impacts," Wheeler-Berliner said.



*Jenny Brundin/CPR News* An empty bank of computers at Grant Beacon Middle School in Denver. School officials would like to ensure every child has access to a computer device and the internet at home in case schools must return to remote learning or a hybrid model.

Colorado suffers from a lack of broadband access, he said, as well a lack of hardware and equipment and low levels of overall digital literacy.

The issue disproportionately affects communities of color, he said. Wheeler-Berliner said half of all Black and Latinx workers have limited or no digital skills. That's due in part to long-standing inequities in American society such as income and wealth gaps and uneven access to higher education, [according to the National Skills Coalition](#).

Colorado does have some work underway, planning a digital literacy plan for the state and has developed a remote learning resource for teachers, but officials say more funding is needed to close the digital divide.

In May, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the HEROES Act, which includes \$1.5 billion for schools and libraries to purchase devices such as tablets, laptops or WiFi hotspots for students. However, the U.S. Senate has not taken action on the legislation. Advocates are urging the U.S. Senate to increase related funding to \$4 billion, which would help the nation come closer to bridging the digital divide.

### **How Denver Public Schools expanded access**

In Denver Public Schools, about 93 percent of students now have reliable internet access and virtually all students have devices, said Denver Superintendent Susana Cordova.

DPS ordered thousands of devices and hot spots and worked with Comcast to get families connected to the company's low-cost Internet Essentials program. The district wants 100 percent of students connected but didn't provide a deadline. Cordova says the technology gap is a critical issue that extends well beyond the global pandemic.

"The students who grow up with devices in their home are able to continue their learning real-time, all the time, and we want to make sure that's something that is not dependent on something like the Internet Essentials program during a pandemic but is something we can make sure all of our students have access to on an ongoing basis," Cordova said.

Comcast's [Internet Essentials](#) program provides two free months of internet to families who qualify for subsidized school meals, or any federal program such as subsidized housing, Medicaid or food stamps. After that, it is \$9.95 per month plus tax.

Some [undocumented families this spring didn't feel safe signing up for the program](#) because the application so prominently asked for a Social Security number or photo identification.

"This was a huge barrier. It scared a lot of families away from applying for the program," said Brock Grosso, an organizer for the Denver Classroom Teachers Association.

[Coloradans for the Common Good](#), a coalition of union, labor and faith-based groups, brought these concerns to Comcast. The company recently changed its application nationally making the Social

Security number request less prominent and more explicitly explaining [secondary forms of ID](#) that are acceptable.

Significantly, Comcast also increased the internet speed in the Internet Essentials program and extended the sign-up period for the program through the end of the year.

Increasing the internet speed allows students “to access the classes in a flawless manner so they can interact and be active participants,” said Laura Martinez, a parent in Commerce City, where she said many families get internet through their phones.

Emilio Ramos, a DPS social worker, spoke with several families who expressed concern last spring.

“I find the new application process more welcoming and I am confident it will reduce hesitations some of my families had,” he said. “These vulnerable students will now have a better opportunity at not only receiving academic success but also staying connected with school mental health providers, speech therapists and other resources public schools provide. It’s a huge step towards the equity process.”

### **Inequality means not every family has the same internet**

But Comcast’s change in the internet speed won’t help everyone in Colorado. For example, a map of T-Mobile and Sprint’s internet and data access shows that residents in Denver’s northeastern neighborhoods and Commerce City don’t have access to fast data speeds that residents of southeast Denver do.

The coalition CCG plans to host a larger “summit” with all internet providers, school district leaders, and elected officials later this summer to explore whether the state can develop a coordinated effort regarding internet access.

“This is an essential service now,” said Grosso. “This is like running water, this is like electricity and we’ve got to find a way to make sure every student in our state has access.”

But even with better access, Cordova said the district must work on increasing parents’ knowledge of how to use the internet and computers effectively.

“There still is a really big gap in terms of parents’ ability to understand how to connect a computer to the internet and how to maneuver through the different online learning platforms,” Cordova said.

Outreach to families revealed that English language learners and some low-income families have struggled the most, she said.

The district is [considering pushing back](#) the start date of school for a week to allow individual check-ins for students to see how they’re doing emotionally and make sure technology is in place in case schools have to be shuttered again, Cordova said.

For families selecting a fully virtual learning program, Cordova said it won't be like the emergency remote plans teachers had to hastily put together this spring.

"The feedback was that when there were live synchronous classes, that students were more engaged and participated at higher rates," she said.