

Some Undocumented Families Don't Feel Safe Applying For Free Internet, Making Remote Learning Even More Difficult

By Jenny Brundin April 14, 2020

Teachers and district officials at Denver Public Schools are concerned that undocumented students and families aren't accessing remote learning opportunities because of the requirements placed on getting free internet through Comcast.

Denver educators and representatives from the Denver teacher's union say some undocumented families are concerned that the application asks for a social security number or photo identification. Families say giving away that information makes them targets for deportation or being detained.



Photo: Jenny Brundin / CPR News

"It's creating a barrier where many families are not comfortable filling that out and so they're not able to take advantage of the free internet access," said Tiffany Choi, president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association.

Coloradans for the Common Good, a coalition of union, labor and faith-based groups, sent a letter to Comcast's mountain region office requesting a meeting to discuss different options for people who want to use this service. CCG says one option could be using a student's ID rather than a social security number.

Comcast says it will respond to the letter and wants to make sure people remain connected and able to access the internet during the pandemic.

Districts around the state say internet connectivity is their biggest challenge in reaching students. As many as 64,000 Colorado students don't have internet access, according to preliminary results from a state survey conducted by the Colorado Education Initiative and the Colorado Department of Education.

Denver Public Schools estimates that **8 percent of its 92,000 students** don't have access to the internet.

A Pew **study on the digital homework gap** during the new coronavirus outbreak found that one-in-four teens in households with an annual income under \$30,000 lack access to a computer at home. Last month, Denver Public Schools distributed Chrome books and mobile hotspots so students could participate in remote schooling.

Denver Public Schools also encouraged families to explore Comcast's **Internet Essentials** program. It provides two free months of internet to families that qualify for subsidized school meals, or any federal program such as subsidized housing, Medicaid or food stamps. DPS's **website** says signing up requires up to two forms of identification and that no social security number is required.

Comcast allows applicants who do not wish to provide or who do not have a social security number to take a picture of themselves holding another ID or to bring the ID to a company store. It also accepts a school photo ID and a copy of a utility bill among other **secondary forms of identification**.

Emilio Ramos, a Denver school social worker spoke with several families who expressed concern.

"They're afraid of their information and photo being put in some kind of government system that's going to hurt them with an agency like ICE," he said.

DPS is encouraging families who are uncomfortable with providing ID to contact the district's Family and Community Engagement Helpline at 720-423-3054.

Prior to the new coronavirus outbreak, undocumented immigrants felt targeted. One immigrant rights group in Colorado said **earlier this year** there were three incidents of ICE detaining parents taking their children to school. This led to heightened fear in many undocumented families who now also struggle with job losses.

Comcast says it doesn't track or report their customers' immigration status. The company says they're committed to closing the digital divide.

If families are reluctant to sign up for internet service through Comcast, Ramos tells families about alternatives, like free mobile hotspots located around the city.

Choi of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association says the primary worry is being able to check on kids' mental and physical health such as whether they have food and housing.

"Emotionally if they need support, we can't provide that to them if they haven't been able to connect with anyone from the district," she says, adding that lack of food, housing, and now internet access are all "barriers to an equitable education."