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Online classes aren't going anywhere, but thousands of Colorado students still don't have internet access

Student demand for laptops and Chromebooks has dropped but districts are still questioning how to reach all their kids with reliable internet.

BY ERICA BREUNLIN - JUL 17, 2020

Laura Martinez's home sits on a two-block stretch of Commerce City where cell phone service doesn't exist. Anyone in her community who doesn't have access to the internet can't make a phone call.

The urban technological headache is one shared by people in many of Colorado's far-flung communities, where families often struggle with both cell phone service and a reliable internet connection.

And it's a problem that has been amplified as school districts have had to switch to remote learning to protect against the spread of the coronavirus, despite their best efforts this spring to ensure their families had internet.

Thousands of Colorado students who are heading back to school are not much better prepared for the possibility of remote learning than they were in the spring, when they had to flip to online classes in a matter of weeks. Estimates suggest that about 10% of Colorado K-12 students — about 90,000 total — still don't have a reliable connection to the internet, according to the Colorado Education Initiative.

Most of those students are Hispanic, according to a study from the Colorado Futures Center, which is affiliated with Colorado State University.



Norma Buenrostro and son Izrael, 7, a second-grader at Knapp Elementary, have their chance to pick up a computer after waiting in line together. Lines of cars and people on foot arrive at Abraham Lincoln High School to pick up computers needed for online learning during the COVID-19 outbreak on April 8, 2020 in Denver. (Kathryn Scott, Special to The Colorado Sun)

It's not yet clear how many of the state's 178 school districts will pursue distance learning this fall. While some districts like Denver Public Schools and Harrison School District 2 in Colorado Springs are forging ahead with full in-person learning, some have settled on a combination of in-person and online instruction. Others still are waiting for more health and safety guidance before making a decision.



There is some good news. Many districts, including large metro ones and some as small as Centennial School District R-1 in San Luis, have enough devices like laptops and Chromebooks for all their students.

But with that volume of computers comes a need for districts to maintain and repair devices for students, a task that many aren't equipped to handle. And just because students have a computer in their hands doesn't mean they'll be able to complete their coursework. They need the internet as much as they need a gadget.

Education leaders and advocates believe districts are overall better prepared for online learning than they were when the schools shut down to slow the spread of the coronavirus, but significant gaps in connectivity persist. And those gaps are likely to lead to more gaps, with students falling behind in their studies.

DPS estimates that 93% of its families have reliable internet in their homes, Superintendent Susana Cordova said during a media briefing on Wednesday, but the district is working to make sure 100% of its students have a home connection that gives them access to online assignments, classes and meetings with teachers and other school staff. She added that the district wants to ensure that all students can log onto the internet at home.

In some rural districts, around half of kids don't have a reliable internet connection, which is one factor motivating many districts to get their students back into the classroom this fall, said Michelle Murphy, executive director of Colorado Rural Alliance, which represents 146 rural Colorado districts.

An internet victory for undocumented families

After extending spring breaks in hopes of avoiding having to take instruction online, districts scrambled to figure out how to meet the technology needs of students.

Some districts held technology distribution events at schools, handing out laptops, Chromebooks and hotspots to families. Some districts sent staff out to homes to make special deliveries. Other districts took a more blended approach to remote learning with combinations of paper packets and digital coursework. And technology-gearred nonprofit organizations like PCs for People ramped up collections of donated technology for families in need.

A statewide needs assessment of school districts conducted by CEI and the Colorado Department of Education in late March and early April found about 53,000 students across the state didn't have access to a device and about 66,000 didn't have reliable internet at home, Rebecca Holmes, CEI's president and CEO, said during Wednesday's media briefing.

Black, Latino and low-income families were most significantly affected by the shortage of devices, Holmes said.

The need for devices among students has declined as districts tapped into emergency funds, reserves and COVID-19 relief dollars to cover devices for families.



“But now they have ongoing technological repair needs that even our largest districts aren't really designed to take care of in the fall and all year and that our smallest districts will really struggle to address,” Holmes said.

At the same time, the need for internet connectivity has risen.

“As the economic impacts of this pandemic have gone on,” Holmes said, “families haven't been able entirely to prioritize the cost of internet access, even when it's low.”

Some families were able to take advantage of more affordable internet offers from providers like Comcast, whose Internet Essentials program was one resource for DPS families, Cordova said.

In March, Comcast began offering the discounted service for free for 60 days to new families. The service usually costs \$9.95 per month and caters to low-income households. Comcast also increased the service's internet speed to 25 mbps and plans to continue making it free for 60 days to new eligible customers for the rest of 2020. The company is also offering free public Wi-Fi through the end of the year.

But the Internet Essentials program didn't necessarily appeal to everyone who qualified. Coloradans for the Common Good this spring approached Comcast to ask the internet giant to modify its application, which asked for Social Security numbers even though other forms of identification were acceptable.

That deterred some immigrant families from attempting to enroll in the service. **Coloradans for the Common Good** — composed of churches, community organizations and teachers' unions — reached out to lawmakers and Comcast's corporate leaders pleading for change. After a series of email exchanges and Zoom meetings, Comcast adjusted its application nationwide to better reflect the variety of identification forms accepted. That change took effect in June, said Marilyn Winokur, co-chair of Coloradans for the Common Good.

“We want to get as many, many families that don't have internet access to have the access that they need in order to participate in remote learning should it happen again,” Winokur said.

Emilio Ramos, a social worker for two DPS elementary schools in southwest Denver, sees the change Comcast made as a huge step toward equity needed in public schools.

Ramos, who works mostly with students who are Hispanic and come from low-income families, said students learning English, in particular, can fall behind in school without reliable access to the internet. Those students often rely on special interventions at school to



Taylor Watkins, a network administrator, wipes down all the laptops and cords before handing them out to students. (Kathryn Scott, Special to The Colorado Sun)

catch their language skills up to their peers' levels and are provided extra help with their language development.

Without a connection to school, he said, they'll lose out academically.

"Every day they'll be missing a lesson and getting further and further behind," Ramos said.

There also are mental health consequences for students who lose their link to school, which can be "like a sanctuary," he said.

"We've got to be able to connect these students with schools so we can also check on their well-being," Ramos said.

A chronic problem in rural Colorado

Murphy, of Colorado Rural Alliance, hasn't heard a lot of concern about a lack of devices for students but said there is still "a considerable need" for internet connectivity in rural parts of the state.

Not much progress has been made since the spring, Murphy said, as many rural students continue to struggle to access the internet from their homes. In some parts of Colorado, connections simply aren't possible or are spotty at best. Other areas of the state work off satellite-based internet service. Either way, students don't have the bandwidth needed to engage in online learning, Murphy said.

"The connectivity issue creates a real equity issue for our students, and we have to figure out ways to provide an equitable education to kids that don't have access" if and when districts jump back into remote learning, she said.

Rural districts, like their counterparts in more populated areas, have gotten creative in trying to bridge the digital divide. These efforts include purchasing hotspots, covering reduced-price internet costs for families and — for the coming school year — installing swivel cameras in classrooms so students at home can watch their teachers, whether the parents of those students choose to keep them home or whether schools close, Murphy said.

Many rural districts are also working with the state's Colorado Empowered Learning program, which supports districts with subsidized online course options, she said.

Centennial Superintendent Toby Melster had an antenna installed on the 200-student district's K-12 school building, hoping to broadcast its Wi-Fi signal farther out into the parking lot, where families could access the internet. At times, the signal stretched about a quarter of a mile from the school, Melster said.



However, families didn't use the signal from the school as much as the superintendent expected them to. He's not certain why but speculates that things like transportation and hectic family dynamics could have gotten in the way.

Melster, who is rolling out a hybrid model for his students and staff this fall, feels more prepared with technology than he did in the spring — in large part thanks to a donation of 200 Chromebooks from The Colorado Trust.

But connectivity still is his district's highest hurdle.

"We're still struggling," he said.

