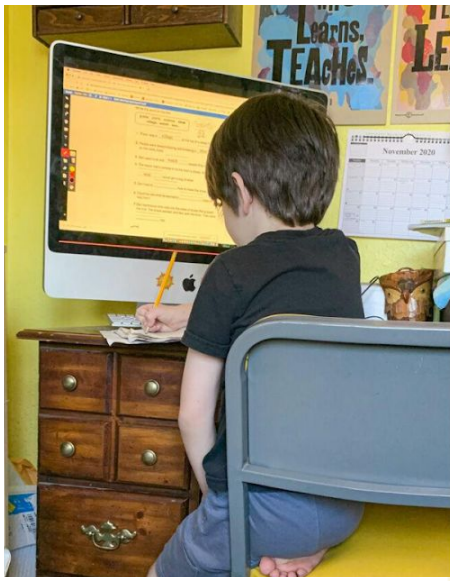
COLORADO SPRINGS INDY

INTERNET CONNECTION

Access to remote learning a challenge in rural communities

Heidi Beedle – on Dec 2, 2020

As school districts across the state move to remote learning in response to rising COVID-19 case numbers, many rural school districts are struggling with how to provide access to education in areas where internet service is unreliable or unavailable. The Pikes Peak Education Association and Coloradoans for the Common Good hosted the first Rural Internet Summit Nov. 18, via Zoom, to address issues related to internet access for rural residents. Educators, advocates, legislators and telecom industry professionals gathered remotely to address the problems and brainstorm possible solutions.



Without access to the internet, some students are left behind during remote learning. By Heidi Beedle

The issue is bigger than just providing students with laptops and hotspots. For rural communities on the Eastern Plains, there simply aren't a lot of options for consumers due to a lack of existing infrastructure. In remote areas, families can pay for satellite internet from Hughesnet, which can be financially prohibitive for some, or rely on cellular networks, which provide spotty coverage east of Colorado Springs and can be overwhelmed by high user volumes. This means many students are unable to engage in remote learning.

Matt Booth, an educator with Ellicott School District 22, told panel participants that his district has used remote learning for 17 out of the 49 instruction days so far this year. For students without reliable internet access, "That's 35 percent of the school year they've missed," Booth said.

Val Mullenax, the library media specialist at Peyton Junior-Senior High School, has witnessed the struggles of students trying to learn remotely. She shared stories of students in the school parking lot, or at McDonald's, trying to access Wi-Fi to submit

assignments. Derek Burnside, principal of Peyton Junior-Senior High School, said these issues particularly affect multiple-student households.

“It is a bigger problem than we realize,” said Mike Juran, CEO of Altia, a Colorado Springs-based software company. Juran and Altia helped provide laptops and hotspots for students in Harrison School District 2 last year. “Even here, locally at D-2, we discovered that over 1,000 families didn’t have internet access, so those kids couldn’t really learn at home. As a tech company, we live and breathe internet access. Our company is spread out around the world and we need that, and we’re used to it, so we can’t imagine rural districts or local districts not having that.”

Derek Slothower, superintendent of Calhan School District RJ-1, doesn’t see the issue of internet access for rural students as one that is going away when, or if, COVID is no longer a national health crisis. Referring to the internet as, “the tool of the academic,” he noted, “Remote access is a door that is not going to close.” Slothower said 9 percent of the students in his district don’t have access to the internet at home.

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The problem is easy to identify, but solutions are harder to pin down. Richard Holtorf, the Republican representative for Colorado House District 64, told summit participants he wasn’t interested in “esoteric conversations about inequity,” but sees private/public partnerships as a potential solution, and pledged to bring these concerns to the recently announced special legislative session, which convened Nov. 30, to address emergency COVID relief measures.

Molly Fohn, anchor institutions program manager for Mobile Citizen — which provides low-cost mobile internet with unlimited data plans exclusively to nonprofit organizations, educational entities and social welfare agencies — pointed to the successes of communities like Red Cliff, Colorado, and the Havasupai Reservation in Arizona in erecting their own broadband towers to beam broadband internet into remote communities. Such towers do require line-of-sight to an existing broadband source, but the components to build them are easily accessible and relatively affordable. Additional broadband towers would take the burden off the existing towers, which can be overwhelmed by too many subscribers logging on at one time.

Larry McDowell, the technology director for Pikes Peak Board of Cooperative Educational Services, said students in places like Simla rely on these broadband

towers, which have been overburdened by the influx of students doing remote learning. During peak usage times, from 4 to 9 p.m., when students are all trying to turn in assignments and access class materials at the same time, the connection becomes so slow it's almost unusable.

"Generally, our communities and our governments and people are going to have to identify that [internet access] as a basic human right," said Juran. "Funding for that, even if you don't have as many people, it's just like plumbing and water and electricity. It's not always the most profitable to go to some of these small communities, and sometimes you lose money, but as a society you have to make that decision. I think now we have to make that decision about internet access as well."