

Our Nation Rises to Meet the Needs of Millions

As COVID-19 swept through populations worldwide, schools across the United States closed their doors and looked to the next best hope for educating this country's millions of students: online learning. For many, this adaptation was doable, but for a large number, it was not. It was in light of this - the digital divide - that schools and communities were called into action to combat one of this country's deepest disparities. Though there is still a long way to go, their success has secured education for thousands of students, salvaging the future of an entire demographic.

First, it is important to understand the root of the issue. The digital divide describes the gap between those with internet access and those without it. This imbalance grew up alongside the recent surge in internet reliance. As the world is running towards an increasingly digital future, those without the necessary wherewithal are falling behind, and a new socioeconomic inequality is steepening division among the American population.

Why is this the case? 40-50% of Americans struggle to pay for basic necessities, such as food and rent payment; for many, internet is the last priority. A 2019 article from the Pew Research Center reported that around 44% of American adults with a household income under \$30,000 were without broadband, and 46% were without a conventional computer. Of additional note, over a third of lower income households with school children were without connection, and the vast majority of this demographic is of non-white ethnic groups. A report from the Federal Communications Commission estimated that 6% of the population, mostly in rural areas, does not even have access to broadband.

In light of this, stress on device and internet-lacking populations increases as schools become reliant on these technologies. In a 2018 report, 58% of students said they used the internet nearly every day for homework. Yet, according to a report of the Pew Research Center, one in five of teens from thirteen to seventeen claimed they could often not complete assignments due to unreliable access. When schools converted to eLearning, mending this rift went from pressing to essential.

Based on my own experience in online school, the internet and a device are absolutely crucial. The ability to receive and turn in assignments in itself relies on access, setting aside class participation and a viable education. Where technology has formerly been an integral part of my schooling, it is now the entirety. With an estimated 12 million students lacking these necessities, there is no doubt that the threat of a serious step back for the progress in education for this country is real. Fortunately, our schools and communities have come together with zeal to prevent this.

Some schools responded by extending their own Wi-Fi to reach outside the building, while a large number also sent school buses around their cities with Wi-Fi hotspots. Issuing devices became a top priority as well and, in many cases, a success. To illustrate, San Antonio Independent School District was able to provide each of their 50,000 students with either a laptop or tablet. Nevertheless, the venture cost them over \$6.1 million, and, for many districts, this expense ratio was far from plausible.

Still, the nationwide pull has been impressive, and outside organizations have lent a helpful hand. Amazon donated millions of dollars in devices to districts across the country, including a donation of 8,200 laptops - worth over \$2 million - to Seattle Public Schools. Additionally, Google donated 4,000 Chromebooks to the California Education Department, along with free Wi-Fi to 100,000 rural households. Numerous other companies have reached out in kind.

The greatest contributions have come from countless nonprofits, which, according to Rand Corporation, provided around 10% of school computers annually even before the shut down. Moreover, under the Cares Act, over \$13 billion in federal funds were allotted to K-12 schools, and the HEROES Act in May endowed an additional \$1.5 billion for the purchase of devices and Wi-Fi hotspots.

Overall, though the issue remains, the herculean efforts of schools and communities are paying off, and, as time gives way to experience, online curriculums are improving. As schools and organizations provide technological and educational resources on an unprecedented scale, the country as a whole has proven that we will not let this virus kill the education of our future generations.