



REPORTING

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Rural California county helps close academic and digital divides



Lemoore, California, in Kings County (Photo: Ken Lund/Flickr)

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, the digital divide in rural California was creating an academic divide. Central California's Kings County has been working to bridge that gap and in recent years providing broadband access to not only students, but their families as well. And in this current environment of online learning and work-from-home, it has never been more important.

"If you can imagine trying to learn now or not have internet at home, what they were going through — it was unbelievable," said Edward Bonham, chief technology officer for the Kings County Office of Education. The County Office of Education offers low-cost 4G LTE internet access to participating school districts and their students and families.

"When they did get that, it really opened up their eyes," said Bonham. "It also allowed the parents to now have more insight to what the kids are doing."

Kings County is an agricultural county with a relatively small population. It includes 13 individual school districts and about 28,000 K-12 students. There are few broadband options for families and those that are available could be cost-prohibitive to the population. Nearly 70% of the County's students are eligible for free or reduced lunches.

Bonham and his team worked to leverage existing technology assets across the county — which included a robust network connectivity to schools — used the 2.5 GHz EBS spectrum to build a private network, and developed partnerships with other agencies within the county.

Students in participating schools (not all of the County's 13 school districts are fully participating in the program) received a handheld Wi-Fi device that they take home. The cost is \$10 per month and allows up to six computers with fast access to the internet. The cost to students/families attending a non-participating school is \$30 a month (\$15 a month for low-income families).

More online access has been shown to increase academic performance. In the Reef-Sunset School District in Avenal, the percentage of students reading at or above grade level in the 2014-15 school year was between 10-13 percent depending on the grade. The next year those numbers rose to between 14-18 percent. In the last school year (2018-19), between 53-59 percent of Avenal students improved their reading placement scores.



“One of the benefits we saw in this, especially in Avenal, was the adoption of parent participation in terms of e-commerce, community involvement, which just opened up all kinds of opportunities for them,” said Pete Bonilla, manager of wireless services for the Kings County Office of Education. One of the Avenal schools started offering after-hours computer literacy classes for parents.

Earlier this year, the Kings County Office of Education and Supply Bank, a nonprofit that provides school supplies to low-income children, presented the program to organizations such as Valley Vision, the California Emerging Technologies Fund (CETF), and the United Way.

“They somehow managed, for pennies on the dollar for broadband, to build this system that not only covers low-income students, but covers every single student in the school and in the school district where the system is up and running,” said Benito Delgado-Olson, executive director and founder of Supply Bank.

“It was cool to see that the price point for communities to get this program was very cheap and that so many people were utilizing it,” said Yzabelle Della Cruz, project associate at Valley Vision, a Sacramento-based civic leadership organization.

Expanding broadband access in all regions has been a priority of the California Economic Summit and the 2020 Summit Roadmap, working with CETF, the Regional Broadband Consortia, members of the Summit’s Elevate Rural Initiative, and the Governor’s Broadband for All initiative.

And as California schools moved to distance and online learning due to COVID-19, Kings County schools were in a good position to make that transition.

“Many were already there,” said Bonham. “They switched to Google classrooms and the teachers would assign assignments through there, so the kids at home would be able to log on to their Google classroom because we do provide the internet connectivity.”

“What I always say when I look at [Kings County], they’re not just closing the digital divide, they closed it. In those districts, it does not exist,” said Delgado-Olson. “The benefits of it are just so profound.”

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