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Partnerships Can Close the Digital Divide (Contributed)

In California, COVID-19 and school closures have exposed the depth of the digital divide. But in San Jose, the state and private partners have a strategy that boosts digital inclusion and could be a model nationwide.

BY **APOORVA PASRICHA, KEVIN FRAZIER** / MAY 11, 2020

No student should be robbed of an education that defines their economic mobility. [T&G Staff FIle Photo/Rick Cinclair]   TNS

It's unfortunate that it took a pandemic to reveal that the Internet is a basic human right. Yet in California, home to Silicon Valley, 20 percent of students (https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__edsource.org_2020_thousands-2Dof-2Dcalifornia-2Dstudents-2Dto-2Dget-2Dfree-2Dwifi-2Dand-2Dchromebooks-2Dfor-2Ddistance-2Dlearning_627823&d=DwMFaQ&c=RAhzPLrCAq19eJdrcQiUVEwFYoMRqGDAXQ_puw5tYjg&r=Mcl9Z83`u4enfiDDwLQjQMI5qeyfx-zOBTS3h2Bc01tqww&e=) are not connected in their homes.

The digital divide transcends state boundaries, with 12 million students (https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/ff7b3d0b-bc00-4498-9f9d-3e56ef95088f/the-digital-divide-.pdf) across the country without access to devices or Internet. Students will not be returning to physical classrooms anytime soon and will be required to complete schooling in the form of "distance learning."

COVID-19 has exposed the digital divide. Historically marginalized students — low income, non-English speaking, Black, and Latino — are much more likely to be on the wrong side of it.

If bridging the divide wasn't complicated enough, the pandemic exacerbates the two primary barriers in getting students connected: financial and operational. Public school systems face budget deficits, limiting investment in technology to enable a 1:1 device to student ratio. With schools closed, getting devices to students carries public health and distributional concerns. Moreover, many are unable to get online because of cost, bandwidth issues, or increased service delivery times from Internet service providers (ISPs).

The solution is clear — build an infrastructure with public-private partnerships to enable systems-level change that addresses the root causes of the issue, creates coordination and empowers various groups across communities. Tech companies, state and local governments, school districts, ISPs, and community organizations all need to invest in a coordinated manner. No student should be robbed of an education that defines their economic mobility. San Jose and California have built a model for effective systems-level change that should be emulated nationwide. The 28 states (https://www.vox.com/2020/4/21/21223585/school-closure-impact-students-children) with schools closed for the year must act now.

The tech companies that perpetuated the divide have a moral responsibility and an incentive to invest in a pipeline of future talent. We need them to remove financial barriers to digital access. California Gov. Newsom made a call to action (https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/04/20/governor-newsom-announces-cross-sector-partnerships-to-support-distance-learning-and-bridge-the-digital-divide/) for cross-sector partnerships in closing the divide for distance learning. In 2019, the city of San Jose launched the Digital Inclusion Fund (https://www.sjdigitalinclusion.org/), the nation's first single source of funding that supports closing the divide. These complementary efforts enable sustainable action. Statewide, the governor's initiative incentivizes companies to shift their philanthropy to promoting digital equity. Locally, the Digital Inclusion Fund enables success through its robust partner ecosystem.

The impact of the financial investment is contingent upon coordination and preparation to distribute these resources and leverage technology in teaching, an effort that needs to be taken on at the county level by school districts. We need every school district to:

Capture data — We need to know who is not connected and to what degree, via electronic surveys, phone calls, mail, or other exhaustive mechanisms that don't exclude participation based on access. Data will inform equitable resource distribution.

Communicate resources — Many families are unaware that ISPs have taken steps to offer affordable services. Districts must eliminate this information gap. Santa Clara County collaborated with the California Emerging Technology Fund (http://www.cetfund.org/) and the Digital Inclusion Partnership to mail multilingual custom flyers listing offers in each neighborhood and relevant community organizations that families can get help from.

Prepare transition — A device and connection are the initial pillars. Schools need to standardize their understanding of distance and online learning and implement each other's best approaches — Rocketship Public Schools (https://edtec.com/2020/04/13/leading-in-a-crisis-spotlighting-our-school-partners/) launched a Distance Learning Launchpad with curated resources to support families and educators. School districts across the nation shouldn't be inventing the wheel in isolation.

COVID-19 will transform public education. In 10 years, the districts that used the pandemic as a catalyst to get every child online, built a budget for a 1:1 device to student ratio, and crafted robust technology-focused learning plans will point to better student outcomes.

No amount of local coordination should ignore the unique power that ISPs wield in addressing financial and operational barriers. In response to advocacy from Bay Area nonprofits, ISPs created affordable offers for low-income families, ones that take multiple weeks to implement. This isn't sufficient.

Distance learning means multiple students in the same house are trying to load videos simultaneously. This requires bandwidth. ISPs across the state need to increase bandwidth and expand customer service to reduce service delivery times. ISPs may respond to political and regulatory pressure from the FCC. Petitioning the FCC (https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2019.03.19%20Letter%20to%20FCC%20on%20Emergency 19.pdf) to leverage its power to expand connectivity is a matter of national importance — 42 million Americans lack access.

All these efforts must ultimately flow through local community organizations. They are trusted brokers to low-income families, especially those who are undocumented or have limited English proficiency. Through its Digital Inclusion Fund, San Jose leveraged its ecosystem of community organizations and trained them to assist families and collect grievances to further advocate or coach them on how to use the devices. Parents need to know how to get online, check their child's grades, and intervene where needed.

A device and connectivity are only two of the three pillars necessary to systematically close the digital divide. Local communities across the nation need to identify their respective partners to play this role of providing digital literacy and support in transitioning families online.

This needs to be a systems approach, with participation from every stakeholder in the ecosystem. Wi-Fi installed in public school buses across neighborhoods is a mere Band-Aid. Steps taken by California and San Jose should be scaled across the country. Every day we wait to marshal financial resources, coordinate and advocate is a day spent hindering a student's outcome.

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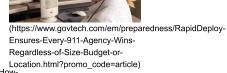(https://www.govtech.com/futureready/news/Cloud-Powers-Oklahomas-COVID-Response.html?promo_code=article)

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Whether located in large urban centers or rural communities, 911 agencies nationwide face the same obstacles.

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