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Will COVID-19 Be Impetus to Close Digital Divide?

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For most of his career, Virginia teacher David Simms has looked forward to each school year. To the joy of seeing the new faces and the opportunity of helping young people move a few steps ahead in life. But with the COVID-19 pandemic still forcing classes online, teachers, parents, staff and the kids themselves are struggling with one of the nation's most enduring problems – bridging the digital divide.

What is the Digital Divide?

There was a time in the not so distant past when high speed Internet access was seen as something of a luxury – nice to have but not critical to daily life. But as COVID-19 has forced millions of Americans into working from home, a daily dose of Zoom calls, webinars, VPN connections and more has made having a high-speed broadband connection absolutely crucial to doing our jobs.

Unfortunately, a lot of us are still out in the Internet cold. According to the Federal Communications Commission, more than 21 million Americans (<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2019/07/21-million-americans-still-lack-broadband-connectivity>) lack access to a broadband Internet connection, defined as one with download speeds of at least 25 megabytes per second (Mbps) and upload speeds of at least 3 Mbps. Another survey (<https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2020/03/03/1994353/0/en/BroadbandNow-Ranks-the-Best-and-Worst-U-S-States-for-Internet-Coverage-Speed-and-Price.html>) from the research group BroadbandNow pegs the figure at twice that (42 million). Meanwhile, analysis from tech giant Microsoft contends (<https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2019/04/08/its-time-for-a-new-approach-for-mapping-broadband-data-to-better-serve-americans/>) the real number is actually much higher yet, with their data showing approximately 163 million people currently unable to access a broadband connection.

The BroadbandNow survey in fact shows how massive the gap can be just from state to state. According to their data (<https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2020/03/03/1994353/0/en/BroadbandNow-Ranks-the-Best-and-Worst-U-S-States-for-Internet-Coverage-Speed-and-Price.html>), New Jersey has the best availability in the country, with 98 percent of their residents having access to wired broadband and 78 percent with access to a low-priced plan. Conversely, only 61 percent of Alaska residents have broadband access, and there are no low-priced plans available at all in the Last Frontier.

The problem is particularly acute in low-income households, where more than 40 percent lack broadband access (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/07/digital->

divide-persists-even-as-lower-income-americans-make-gains-in-tech-adoption/), and in rural areas, where in 2019 a third of the population indicated (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/31/digital-gap-between-rural-and-nonrural-america-persists/>) they had no broadband connection.

Urban areas are hardly immune, however. A 2019 study by the California Emerging Technology Fund (<http://www.cetfund.org/progress/annualsurvey/>) (CETF) showed that lack of access affected 16 percent of Los Angeles residents and 12 percent of San Franciscans, higher than the 9 percent mark of rural areas like the Inland Empire and the Central Valley.

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Who is Most Impacted by the Digital Divide?

While connectivity has impacted everyone during COVID-19, the challenges have been particularly acute for public schools. A recent study (https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/education/article_a2597ee0-dcd1-11ea-b916-87348f601360.html) in Louisiana showed that 25 percent of Pelican State schoolchildren lacked Internet access, the same as in Kentucky (<https://www.kentucky.com/news/local/education/article244885897.html>) and New Mexico (https://www.governing.com/community/One-Quarter-of-New-Mexico-Students-Lack-Internet-Access.html?utm_term=READ%20MORE&utm_campaign=Three%20Small%20Cities%20That%20Are%20Thriving%20Despite%20the%20Pandemic&utm_content=email&utm_source=Act-On+Software&utm_medium=email). In New Jersey, more than 230,000 students either lack Internet access or the computing device needed to partake in online classes. And in California, a 2019 Public Policy Institute of California study (<https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-digital-divide/>) showed roughly 41 percent of rural homes and 45 percent of low income homes in the Golden State lacked a broadband connection.

It is a familiar situation for Simms, who says the demographics in his Shenandoah Valley district run the gamut from the very wealthy to the very poor. At least half come from rural environments, he says, and many of them fall into the latter economic group.

"We're trying to get all of them Chromebooks," he says. "But many of these kids don't have Internet access at home so they still have to come into the school to get their lessons."

To that end, stories also abound of parents taking their kids to a Starbucks or McDonald's to do their homework.

"That should not be happening in California," said former state senator and current CETF Vice-Chair Martha Escutia during a recent broadcast of the Nation State in Play podcast (https://nation-state-of-play-california-politics-in-the-age-of-covi.simplecast.com/episodes/former-senator-martha-escutia-on-how-to-close-the-digital-divide-4W_3IIK). "We should not be going to McDonald's to have access to the Internet."

Even where broadband is readily available, costs or other factors could prevent a household from actually having the service. In Texas, for example, approximately 94 percent of homes have access to a broadband connection, but only around 67 percent (<https://www.texastribune.org/2020/04/01/digital-divide-dire-consequences-texas/>) actually subscribe to a service.

Having the connection and the service is also still not a guarantee that everyone in the home will be able to get online with full access whenever they need it. With everyone working at home at one time, having a plan with enough bandwidth to handle all of the demands on the system is more important than ever.

So is having adequate hardware. The CETF report showed that for 18 percent of California households a smartphone was the only tool available to access the Internet. That's better than nothing, but hardly ideal for doing coursework. A recent Education Week survey (<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/04/10/the-disparities-in-remote-learning-under-coronavirus.html>) showed that in fact 64 percent of district leaders from high poverty areas said technology access has been a major problem during COVID-mandated online learning.

All of which makes for an extremely challenging environment for everyone involved.

"The best analogy I can give is that it's like being on a trampoline that's on fire, covered in fire ants and you have to pee," says Simms. "These last six months have really exposed the

fragility of the whole education system.”

What Are States Doing to Bridge the Digital Divide?

Although the digital divide is hardly a new problem, the pressures of COVID-19 have ramped up the response from all levels of government.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, in 2020 at least 43 states and Guam addressed broadband legislation (<https://www.ncsl.org/research/telecommunications-and-information-technology/broadband-2020-legislation.aspx>). Thirty one passed bills or resolutions, covering a wide range of applications, from schools to infrastructure, municipal-run broadband networks, rural and underserved communities, smart communities and taxes.

The federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, allocated almost \$31 billion to aid education systems around the country. Several states, including Oregon, Kansas (<https://www.hutchnews.com/news/20200810/kansas-squo-state-finance-council-oks-60m-in-grants-for-broadband-boost>), New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Arkansas (<https://katv.com/news/local/arkansas-gov-asa-hutchinson-to-give-covid-19-briefing-08-18-2020>) and New Jersey, indicated they will spend at least some of their portion on addressing broadband access for students. Some of that includes providing school districts with thousands of laptops, tablets and wi-fi hotspots, particularly in rural areas where broadband access continues to be limited.

States are also tapping into their own funds. In California, Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) allocated an additional \$5.3 billion for schools in the state budget he signed in June, and the state has to date provided schools with over 73,000 computing devices and almost 190,000 hotspots. Newsom then issued an executive order (http://cert1.mail-west.com/rm3Uyj3H/3Ugtmyuzjanmc7/jb71/n55ag17453/vnq3Uy/13Uq/608aujb7/2uufkmngt?_c=d%7Cze7pzanwmhlzgt%7C17owhn806zxshh2&_ce=1597777058.901cd37016d7c23fa59de101ca3c46ae) in August that directed state agencies to accelerate all efforts related to broadband deployment, and for the state's Broadband Council to form a new state broadband action plan.

His order further sets a minimum broadband speed goal of 100 megabits per second download speed for state agencies under his authority, “to guide infrastructure investments and program implementation” to benefit residents.

In June, Illinois, Gov. J.B. Pritzker (D) announced (<https://www.benton.org/blog/illinois-addresses-digital-divide>) \$50 million in grants for broadband projects around the Prairie State, the first round of a \$420 million broadband expansion program intended to secure high speed connectivity to every corner of the state by 2024.

And in Tennessee, Gov. Bill Lee (R) recently announced (<https://www.telecompetitor.com/tennessee-more-than-doubles-funding-for-broadband-improvements/>) the state will add \$61 million in CARES money to the \$60 million that lawmakers had previously allocated to fund broadband projects around the Volunteer State.

To former California Assemblymember Lloyd Levine, now a consultant and Senior Policy Fellow at the U.C. Riverside School of Public Policy, those are all good signs. And, he says, actions that are long overdue.

“People have been working on this for 15 years or more,” he says. “They’ve rattled sabers and tried to draw attention to it, but it has remained an unseen crisis. Well, it is now fully visible, as are the ramifications of the failure to address this.”

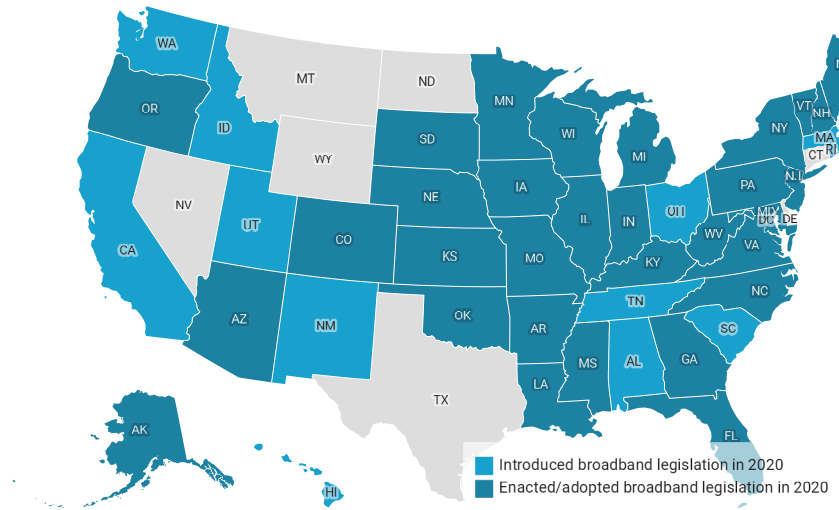
And, he says, there could be a real benefit to the pain parents and students and teachers are all feeling in dealing with the digital chasm.

“If one good thing comes out of all this, it is that it has starkly illustrated the problem of the digital divide and the necessity for technology for students as young as the elementary school years,” he says. “So it is my hope that we don’t then go backwards when this is all over. Broadband is a necessary utility and it needs to be treated that way for educational purposes.” -- By RICH EHISEN

Most Statehouses Addressed Broadband in 2020

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Forty-three states introduced bills or resolutions this year dealing with broadband, including access in schools and rural and underserved areas, according to analysis of State Net legislative data by the National Conference of State Legislatures (<https://www.ncsl.org/research/telecommunications-and-information-technology/broadband-2020-legislation.aspx>). Such legislation was enacted or adopted in 31 of those states.



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