

Underconnected: Adequate Internet is Critical for Low-Income Students



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THE SITUATION

The necessary response to COVID-19, specifically the closure of school buildings, upended family routines and disrupted what it meant to “go to school.” Almost overnight, students, educators, and parents shifted to distance learning methods, which created both opportunities for students to learn in their home environment and introduced new barriers to accessing school for many families in the community. There is much to learn from school building closures and to ensure that families, teachers, and other critical stakeholders have the space to provide real feedback about their experiences. By providing this brief to the community, the Parent Leadership Team hopes to improve meaningful access to distance learning for all students.

Throughout September and October 2020, The Parent Leadership Team (PLT) set out to hear from families about how remote learning is impacting them. The PLT had conversations with over 100 Hispanic families in Southern Nevada about their experiences accessing and navigating distance learning. Many of the families were Spanish-speaking only and had multiple school-aged children in the home.

Most pressing of all issues that arose, the PLT learned that low-income families with more than one school-aged child are experiencing major barriers to accessing adequate internet to support distance learning.

ABOUT THE FAMILIES

- The PLT spoke with 105 Hispanic and Spanish speaking families with students in public school in Southern Nevada
- 75% of families attended their zoned public school (CCSD), 14% attended public charter schools, 1% attended homeschool

THE ISSUE: IS ACCESS ENOUGH?

Adequacy is not just about school funding. Through the use of emergency funds from the state and federal government, connecting families to the internet has been a core component of the community-wide response to COVID-19, a critical first step in access to learning in a distance education environment. *But, is access alone enough?* In order to meaningfully engage in distance learning, students must have access to devices connected to the internet, **but many families don't have access to adequate internet. That is, internet bandwidth strong enough to support live streaming, video chats, downloads and uploads of documents, and homework help -- all on multiple devices at the same time.**

Subsidized Internet Quality



25 MBPS
speed

Free for eligible families
or \$9.95/month



Multiple students relying on a single internet source slows connectivity

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Parent
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Parents who participated in these conversations shared their appreciation for community-wide efforts to provide subsidized or free internet to families. They also shared their concern that the limited dollars available that were being invested on behalf of low-income families may not be meeting their intended outcomes. For families who called the internet service provider directly to troubleshoot their internet speeds, they were promptly guided to purchase a more expensive internet package -- one that many could not afford. This has created an impossible ultimatum for families: upgrade their subsidized internet by purchasing an unaffordable internet subscription or jeopardize their children's education because of an inability to access adequate internet for distance learning.

Additional support for internet access in the form of hotspots are available to qualifying families that live in areas with poor physical internet infrastructure or have four or more children. However, this leaves a gap in adequate access for families with 2-3 school-aged children in the home. Children who are not able to access distance learning due to internet quality will continue to be left further behind. Families of students with special needs also lose out on valuable time with specialists. Unfortunately, these are often the children who have been traditionally underserved by the education system, even prior to this new learning situation.

While families recognize that the impact of the pandemic is unprecedented and the community has moved quickly to help, **there is still an urgent need to develop partnerships and policies that improve internet speeds for children in low-income families to meaningfully engage with distance learning.**

OTHER FINDINGS

- **Parents struggle with their child being bored or losing interest throughout the day**
- **Parents need better, more timely information in a language they feel comfortable with**
- **1 in 5 kids do not have supervision at home during distance learning**
- **1 in 3 families find the online systems difficult to navigate**
- **Almost all kids have access to at least 1 computer in the home**

THE CALL TO ACTION

As the Parent Leadership Team, we...

- Call on The **Clark County School District** to leverage its size and relationships with businesses to improve accessibility to adequate, quality internet. As the 5th largest school district in the US, CCSD has immense buying power that should be used to help those families in need.
- Call on **state** and **local leadership** and the **business community** to create cross-sector partnerships that improve long-term access to adequate internet for low-income families.
- Thank all those who have made important efforts to date and **offer ourselves to be partners** in all future efforts and look forward to working together.

What is the PLT? The Parent Leadership Team is led by and for parents committed to improving education for all students in Southern Nevada, with a focus on issues impacting Hispanic families and their students. The PLT meets bi-monthly. Interested in joining? Contact Selene Lozada, community@opportunity180.org. The PLT is powered by Opportunity 180, a 501(c)3 organization. These are the independent views of the PLT are not necessarily those of Opportunity 180.