Virtual Listening Tour 2020

ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY DEVICES AND RELIABLE, CONSISTENT INTERNET CONNECTIVITY IS CENTRAL TO DISTANCE LEARNING

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused life-altering disruptions in many people's personal and professional lives. Data from our listening tour show that when Florida's education system transitioned to distance learning, educators, students and families experienced myriad challenges. Access to broadband, high-speed internet proved to be the most significant challenge experienced by administrators, educators, students and families in the transition to distance learning. Difficulties reported by our listening tour participants included no access to a device, little to no broadband availability (due to limited infrastructure, limited providers and high cost) and limited data subscriptions as hours of online instruction burned data plans. According to BROADBANDNOW®, Florida has the 5th-best broadband access ranking nationwide, however, the disparities between rural and urban counties is stark. In terms of access and affordability, a quarter-million Floridians have no internet provider in their community at all, close to half-a-million don't have access to high-speed internet and 1 million only have access to a single provider. This roadblock, primarily in high-poverty areas both rural and urban, puts students at a greater risk for learning loss and lack of meaningful engagement under stressful quarantine measures. A series of key themes and recommendations emerged from our interviews and surveys of over 4,000 parents, educators and families from across the state—lack of broadband access impedes education institutions from successfully serving students. Further, our respondents framed broadband access as a digital equity issue, given that internet access allowed for participation not only in schooling but also in commerce and even democracy, as goods, services and governments moved online during the pandemic.

THEMES

Lack of devices and internet access posed significant challenges for educators and students during school closures.

As schools transitioned to distance learning in a matter of weeks, the absence of reliable broadband put many educators and students at a standstill. The inability to connect left some in a void with little to no guidance of what to do (see the Lastinger Center Research Brief on successful communication here). The Federal Communications Commission reports that to successfully download content, use video conferencing, or stream video, the broadband speed should be 25 Mbps (megabits per second). The demand increases as more users in the household login and share the stream. Two-thirds (64%) of educators reported that access to internet services required for distance learning was a challenge for their students and 20% of educators themselves indicated they lacked the speed to deliver online classes. School districts statewide scrambled to launch distance learning programs and many districts had to quickly distribute thousands of devices to students in a minimal-contact manner that protected school staff and families.

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Districts leveraged resources to provide technology and internet access to those students without devices, broadband and fully-funded data plans.

Florida's school districts were required to quickly pivot and implement a distance learning program with very little time for planning and preparation. A first priority for many districts was surveying families in order to distribute electronic devices to students who lacked appropriate technology at home. When executed, school leaders realized that in some areas, even with a device to use, there was little or no broadband for students to successfully engage in distance learning. In some urban areas with abundant access, financial support became a barrier. Students who logged in found themselves booted because they had exhausted their personal data plan (paid subscription) allotment for the billing period or were unable to be approved for new internet service due to past unpaid late fees or other restrictions. Superintendent Kurt Browning reported that for Pasco County families who lost internet service due to the inability to pay, the school district recognized that covering the cost (on average $30) to reconnect was an investment worth making. When compared to the toll that remediation would have on the student and school resources, covering this expense made sense. Rural districts faced even more daunting challenges to provide access to devices and high-speed internet in areas where no provider or infrastructure exists. In these unique circumstances, districts such as Santa Rosa Public Schools leveraged their resources to connect students through both a blended and targeted approach utilizing devices and paper packets. Superintendent Tim Wyrosdick also reported working with internet providers to expand capacity and bandwidth to enable the school district to provide virtual instruction.

CONSIDERATIONS

INCLUDE ACCESS TO BROADBAND CONNECTIVITY, DEVICES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AS PART OF LONG-TERM PLANNING.

Research indicates that successful distance learning requires planning and investment in reliable technology and effective instructional techniques (see our Best Practices Brief here). In addition to these investments, districts would benefit from public/private partnerships that offset the cost of large-scale programs. Ensuring access to broadband and technology promotes educational equity to empower families so they can choose the most appropriate educational approach to meet their students' unique learning needs. A number of districts, such as Alachua and Manatee, outfitted school buses as mobile hotspots to be deployed to connect students in hard-to-reach areas of the community. Brevard Public Schools leveraged their relationships along the Space Coast to garner more than $100,000 in funding for devices and hotspots from companies like Lockheed Martin. In Bay County, the district allocated funding for short-term service contracts with local providers to distribute 600 hotspots. Hillsborough County Public Schools distributed more than 50,000 devices and quickly launched a resource page to support students at home. Additionally, the Florida Department of Education gave rural districts 32,000 devices in partnership with their area education consortiums.

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A bipartisan bill sponsored by Representatives Drake and Ausley and signed into law by Governor DeSantis in June 2020, allocates $5 million to develop broadband access through multi-use corridors connected to the state's turnpike. This is good news for several rural school districts, but connectivity issues are often unique to the availability of local communities' infrastructure and providers. Given the differing needs of each district, developing a strategic plan to leverage funding and partnerships is key to meeting the needs of Florida's very diverse communities. This should merit investment from the highest level possible and could include accessing support from local education foundations and other community partners. In May, the Consortium of Florida Education Foundations reported raising more than $700,000 to assist local school districts with access to devices and broadband. According to Palm Beach Deputy Superintendent and Chief of Schools, Keith Oswald, the district began engaging with local municipalities to develop a long-range plan to leverage support from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act to solve broadband infrastructure issues while simultaneously working with donors and partners to secure hotspots for rural communities in the short term. At the state level, the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity recently established an Office of Broadband within the agency to increase the availability of broadband including funding. Also, in addition to directly distributing devices, the Florida Department of Education's direct support organization, the Florida Education Foundation, awarded more than $300,000 in mini-grants to support creative and innovative solutions to distance learning. Ensuring adequate technology infrastructure and support will take cross-sector collaboration and partnership at the community, state and federal level.

SEEK OPPORTUNITIES THAT STRENGTHEN FUNDING FOR TECHNOLOGY-BASED INFRASTRUCTURE AND SUPPORT.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning, a national leader in researching and improving how teachers deliver learning, launched a comprehensive analysis of the responses and approaches taken by birth through 12th grade public and private education programs throughout Florida during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of a Virtual Listening Tour, researchers interviewed students, parents, teachers, early childhood and K-12 educators and administrators about the effect of COVID-19 and how it impacted the delivery of educational services. The work was made possible with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.