

'It shouldn't take a pandemic': Coronavirus exposes Internet inequality among U.S. students as schools close their doors

Millions of Americans lack Web access, a digital divide that complicates educators' efforts to continue instruction during a health crisis

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Not all students have reliable access to the Internet. (Illustration by Ryan Johnson for The Washington Post.)

Every year, Anthony Angelini surveys his seventh-grade students at New Oxford Middle School in rural Pennsylvania, asking whether they have access to a computer and a reliable way to get online.

And every year, some portion of them say they don't.

“That number is significant when you're talking about kids,” Angelini said.

But his annual query has taken on new urgency in recent days, as schools around the country shut their doors in response to the [fast-spreading coronavirus outbreak](#). While some are migrating their daily lessons and homework assignments onto the Web, many administrators and teachers lack that digital luxury — illustrating how a public health crisis has brought to light a technological one.

In states like Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Washington, educators say they are feeling firsthand the sting of the digital divide — the historically hard-to-erase gap between those who have speedy, modern-day Web connections and those who do not. Even in the time of TikTok, an era when every song, movie and book seem a mere click away, millions of Americans lack basic broadband or simply cannot afford it.

The burden often falls heavily on younger students, who may struggle to complete their classwork even during a normal school week because of technological and economic barriers. But the disruptions wrought by the novel [coronavirus](#) threaten to exacerbate those digital woes, raising the question of whether the [U.S. government and the telecom industry](#) should have done more to cure the country's digital divide — well before a pandemic gripped the nation.

“With coronavirus, we're about to expose just how challenging our digital

divide is, and just how unequal access to broadband is,” said Jessica Rosenworcel, a Democrat on the Federal Communications Commission. “We’re going to have a reckoning.”

The technological troubles that could soon burden teachers and students reflect the widely felt, and often overlooked, hardships that can come from a lack of connectivity.

As coronavirus grips the nation, the Internet offers an economic lifeline to workers who can do their jobs from home, while aiding sick patients looking to chat with their doctors via video. But broadband isn’t available to everyone. More than [21 million Americans](#) do not have access to high-speed Internet, according to the Federal Communications Commission’s latest data. The numbers have improved in recent years, though the gaps remain pervasive, despite heavy investment by government regulators and private companies.

The inequality looms large as schools in more than a dozen states as well as the District of Columbia [shutter in response to coronavirus](#). Before closing their doors, some state and local officials said they faced a difficult question: Should they cease operating for a few weeks, perhaps requiring the addition of school days at the end of their year, or try to teach kids digitally? Web-based learning poses novel challenges for public-school educators, whose services include [many that aren’t strictly instructional](#), such as providing free and reduced lunches for kids who are below the poverty line.

Adding to the headaches, not all students are able to sign onto the Internet in the first place. Nearly [one in five students](#) between kindergarten and 12th grade do not have computers or speedy Web connections, according to data compiled by the Pew Research Center in 2018, the latest available, which said this “homework gap” disproportionately plagues low-income families and people of color.

“There are still some pretty big gaps when it comes to broadband adoption,” said Monica Anderson, Pew’s associate director of research on the Internet and technology.

Many of the roughly 136,500 students in Prince George’s County, Md., likely have some way to get online at home. But local officials last week said they still came to the conclusion they couldn’t ensure all of them did — so the district couldn’t shift classes fully to the Web starting Monday, when state schools close for the next two weeks. Instead, district educators have put together packets of instructional materials.

“We could not guarantee a family in Baden, Maryland, had access. Nor could I guarantee a family in District Heights, Maryland, that may be eligible for free and reduced meals, had access to technology and the Internet,” said Christian Rhodes, the chief of staff for Prince George’s County Public Schools. “That led to our decision.”

Brian Toth, the superintendent of St. Mary’s Area School District, was in the middle of describing a raft of similar digital challenges facing his rural Pennsylvania community — a 342-square-mile expanse that boasts the “largest elk population east of the Mississippi,” he said. Then he received a note from his staff, telling him Gov. Tom Wolf (D) had just canceled school starting Monday — meaning he no longer had a theoretical quandary on his hands.

For Toth, the digital divide long had been a serious concern: Anywhere from 30 to 40 percent of area students don’t have Internet access at home, he said, and about half lack a dedicated device to do their work in the first place. The technological challenges, along with other difficulties in meeting students’ individual educational needs, made it impossible for area schools to go fully online.

“We cannot make that happen for every single student,” Toth said. “Period.”

As other schools nationwide weigh their options, the FCC last week [sought to offer a digital lifeline](#), shoring up commitments from AT&T, Verizon and dozens of Internet providers to help people stay online, even if they ultimately fall behind on their bills. Some telecom giants also said they would make it easier for people to access free wireless hotspots in their communities.

“As the coronavirus outbreak spreads and causes a series of disruptions to the economic, educational, medical, and civic life of our country, it is imperative that Americans stay connected,” FCC Chairman Ajit Pai said in a statement.

And a handful of companies pledged additional aid of their own: Comcast, for example, [announced Friday](#) it would expand its low-income broadband program, offering it free to eligible families for the next 60 days while raising its speed. Charter, which offers internet under the brand Spectrum, said it would [provide similar services](#) for kids that currently lack it over the next two months.

These new offerings apply only to people in areas the companies already serve, meaning some families in need may not be able to take advantage of them. Still, the industry’s efforts drew early plaudits even from those who have long called on the U.S. government and telecom industry to bridge the country’s digital divide.

“I think that’s how you start changing things,” said Joshua Edmonds, a digital inclusion policy fellow for the city of Detroit. He said he’s long operated under a working assumption that “approximately 60 percent of Detroit public school students don’t have high-speed Internet.

But, Edmonds added, the relief should have come sooner. “You had people who had been screaming for years for carriers to do something,”

he said. “It shouldn’t take a pandemic.”

The U.S. government already provides \$4 billion in aid to schools annually to help keep them online. Known as E-Rate, the decades-old pot of funds helps schools and libraries buy and maintain telecommunications services, like speedy Internet connectivity, at steep discounts, a major boost to cash-starved schools’ budgets.

But experts have been warning for years about shortcomings in the program: A 2019 report by the [Government Accountability Office](#), for example, said E-Rate “may limit schools’ ability to provide wireless access off-premises.” Essentially, it means schools and libraries may not be able to use federal dollars to purchase mobile wireless hotspots, which students could take outside the classroom if they couldn’t otherwise get online during the coronavirus outbreak.

“If the commitment is to help all students learn, and be prepared for the future, then anything the FCC can do to level the playing field will be beneficial,” said Randy Russell, the superintendent of Freeman School District, a rural area serving 900 students south of Spokane, Wash., that plans to loan out devices to students in need. “And sometimes that requires revisiting the rules.”

On Sunday, FCC spokeswoman Tina Pelkey said the agency is “exploring additional ways to help keep students and all Americans connected during the coronavirus pandemic.” The issue still has attracted the attention of Congress, where Sen. Edward J. Markey of Massachusetts plans to lead Democrats in a letter Monday urging the FCC to rethink E-Rate, using its “emergency powers to narrow the homework gap during this crisis.”

Democratic Sen. Maria Cantwell, whose home state of Washington is the [worst hit of the U.S. coronavirus outbreak](#), similarly called on the FCC earlier this month to act aggressively to help students and families.

“Covid-19 is going to be a test case for lots of things, where we look at the world differently,” she said in an interview.

NOTE: This article has been shortened for PSY 532 class use.