



The Digital Divide and COVID-19

By Karah Lindsey

When schools moved to all online classes in March of 2020 to slow the spread of COVID-19, some children could no longer get an education because they did not have access to the internet. About 5 million households with school-aged children do not have internet access. Low income households are less likely to have internet than their wealthier counterparts. Only 56% of people with incomes below \$30,000 a year have internet at home compared with 92% of people who made over \$75,000 a year. Some low income households can get around this barrier during times of isolation by using Wi-Fi hotspots on their smartphones. However, only 71% of people making less than \$30,000 a year have smartphones, and not everyone has unlimited data plans that are needed to complete lengthy school assignments.

Now that schools are pondering how they are going to reopen for the fall, they have to come up with ways that allow access to education for all while minimizing the spread of the virus. The majority of school systems, including New York City's and Seattle's, have chosen a hybrid plan, where students attend in-person classes two or three days a week and do virtual learning for the days they don't go to class. Families can also choose to do 100% of their education online for the fall semester. However, Atlanta Public schools have chosen to remain completely virtual for the first half of the semester. Both hybrid and online education plans are challenging to working parents, especially those who have essential jobs that can't be completed from home. About 1 in 3 frontline workers have a child living with them and about 1 in 4 are low-income and are barely over the poverty line, which means that they probably don't have easy access to internet or devices needed to complete school work. This means that about eight percent of our nation's most hard-working, self-sacrificing people will have to balance finding a way for their child to learn and be supervised with the heavy weight of trying to stay safe at work.

If school systems decide to go completely virtual for a period of time, they will have to account for students that can't easily access to internet and don't have good childcare options. While some internet providers offer free internet to low-income households, most of the information I have seen about them came from emails and online ads, which may explain why these programs are vastly underutilized. As seen in the first few months of the pandemic, children don't often focus well at home unless they are under constant supervision. Schools with working parents that choose to go virtual can't expect the child to get work done while unsupervised. They need to provide parents with a variety of childcare resources that can fit the individual families' needs. Schools also need to work with internet providers to come up with a plan that gets information about low-cost home internet in the hands of households that need it effectively.

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