

The Digital Divide: A Call to Action from Arizona School Board Members

We are now nearly two weeks into school closures. The Digital Divide is front and center. The disparities are growing. The achievement gap is widening because our students in low-income communities across urban and rural Arizona have always had access to less opportunities. They rely heavily on our schools to provide that access. During the closures, too many of our students are being left behind – farther behind.

We, Governing Board members across Arizona, are not only signing on to the letter published by Superintendents last week, but we are turning up the volume on the megaphone. We need action. We need action now.

Youth across Arizona in low-income and rural communities are still without academic and social-emotional support. Educators across our state in suburban and middle-class neighborhoods are not only delivering lessons online, but they are also providing virtual counseling sessions and wellness checks. Youth without access to a device and/or the internet are not only missing out on learning, they are also becoming more and more isolated. Depression and anxiety were already at frighteningly high levels. This pandemic, and the seclusion it will cause, is reason for abundant concern from all Arizona residents.

Philanthropy is fundraising at record-high levels, but more needs to be done. Many technology and communications companies have stepped up, but they need to take bigger and bolder steps. Business and industry must contribute. And should lawmakers return in April, helping youth living in poverty and youth in rural communities get access to devices and/or internet must be a large part of any relief or stimulus package.

Simply put, technology in Arizona must be a right, not a privilege. Our schools cannot solve this alone - it must be the responsibility of the entire state.

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From Crisis to Opportunity: The Digital Divide in Arizona

By March 27th, COVID-19 will be more widespread in Arizona than it is today. Likewise, through the month of April and likely May, COVID-19 will get worse, not better. Therefore, Arizona must begin to aggressively and proactively prepare for all schools and school systems across the state to close their doors for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year.

The only way for Arizona to educate its 1.1 million K-12 students during a statewide closure will be, primarily, through some form of online or virtual learning. The only way for Arizona to move most, if not all, learning online is that all youth in Arizona have access to devices (laptops, tablets, smartphones) and to WiFi and Internet services. Fortunately, for many of our students and families, this transition will be smooth. Most youth in Arizona have access to WiFi or Internet and also have at least one device in hand or at home. However, low-income, urban, and rural students, families, and communities are not so fortunate.

Very quickly, in Arizona, the technology divide will soon become one of our state's biggest issues. Candidly, equitable access to technology (both devices and Internet access) is already a major challenge. This crisis, however, will simply shed light on a major disparity that has long existed in Arizona. There is no question that our state has and will continue to have other significant challenges in the coming weeks – healthcare supplies and capacity, the small business crisis, and food insecurity, to name a few. But we must get ahead of the technology challenge that is about to arrive at our doorstep.

With the right strategy, technology access and infrastructure may become one of Arizona's greatest opportunities. Hundreds of thousands of youth need access to the Internet – not just this spring but in the coming months and years in order to be prepared to succeed in the new economy. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Arizonans will need, in the least, part-time work to survive the COVID-19 outbreak.

Large and small technology and communications companies have already stepped up. Most have committed to helping low-income students get Internet access at no cost – free setup, free routers, and a free first month of service. All of this with no contract and no credit check. Other companies are brainstorming ways to get devices into the hands of under-served youth. But more must be done.

Many of our students in Arizona will need more than 30 days of free Internet access. Ideally, our students will need access to Internet for the remainder of the summer (up to 120 days). In addition, technology and communications companies will not have the workforce necessary to quickly and efficiently assist families with start-up.

Through a public-private partnership, likely a collaboration between business, philanthropy, and government, Arizona may be able to use this challenge to dramatically

reduce the digital divide. Initial conversations are underway to determine the scope of work and resources needed to solve this challenge and, again, opportunity.

We will need funds to offset the cost of Internet service for our state's most vulnerable youth – from urban to rural Arizona. We will need funds to meet the increased workforce requirement to complete this work (from customer service assistance to register families to an enhanced installation workforce). Funds will also be necessary to increase access to devices. Finally, funds will also be required to assist the rural communities in need of cell and wireless service.

If Arizona is unable to quickly and dramatically close the digital divide, there are more challenges that lie ahead.

All public schools are obligated to adhere to several state, national, and even constitutional laws that require schools to guarantee free, public, appropriate, and equitable access to education. For example, the US Department of Education states that schools are required to provide the same level of educational services for students of all abilities and disabilities. Consider for a moment the wide spectrum of learners, and their individual needs, across our entire state. It would be impossible for school systems to guarantee equitable access to instruction and services without nearly immediate and complete access to technology.

And yet even with immediate access, other challenges must be considered. Several educators are balancing their own health and childcare issues. Many educators in Arizona who would be required to deliver virtual instruction also lack access to Internet and appropriate instructional devices. Many also need the training and development necessary to be effective virtual educators.

Several school systems are already preparing to send home packets of work, yet educators and education leaders fear the spread of the virus as educators must convene to collaborate and print copies. At the same time, we must guarantee that the physical materials sent home are disinfected and not furthering the spread. Ultimately, this is a 20th Century practice that educators have worked diligently to abandon in the last decade. Full access to technology must be our goal.

We stand by ready to seek and implement any and all solutions possible in order to better serve our staff, students, and families, during and after the current crisis.

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