

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 do 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.

From Crisis to Opportunity: The Digital Divide in Arizona

We will need funds to subsidize 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.

From Crisis to Opportunity: The Digital Divide in Arizona

Dr. Robert Aldridge
Dr. Aspasia Angelou
Dr. Kenneth Baca
Dr. Leon Ben
Dr. Quintin Boyce
Dr. Debbi Burdick
Dr. Howard Carlson
Dr. Gregory Copeland
Mr. Dennis Dearden
Dr. Lily DeBlieux
Dr. Gretchen Dorner
Mr. Peter Dwyer
Dr. Roger Freeman
Mr. Eric Godfrey
Dr. JoEtta Gonzales
Dr. Dennis Goodwin
Ms. Jodi Gunning
Dr. Lupita Hightower
Dr. Bill Johnson
Dr. Mary Kamerzell
Dr. Quinn Kellis
Dr. LeeAnn Lawlor
Dr. Donna Lewis
Dr. Marvene Lobato

Ms. Kristine Morris
Ms. Crystle Nehrmeyer
Mr. Fernando Parra
Dr. Jaime Rivera
Dr. Michael Robert
Ms. Denise Rogers
Dr. Melissa Sadorf
Mr. Antonio Sanchez
Dr. Kristi Sandvik
Ms. Cindy Segotta-Jones
Dr. Lori Shough
Dr. Jeffrey Smith
Dr. Carolyn Wellborn Stewart
Dr. Daniel Streeter
Dr. Paul Tighe
Mr. Robert Tollefson
Dr. Gabriel Trujillo
Dr. Mario Ventura
Dr. Jan Vesely
Ms. Charie Wallace
Dr. Larry Weeks
Mr. Ken VanWinkle
Dr. Gregory Wyman
Mr. Mark Yslas