

# Hartford Courant

## Thousands of Connecticut students did not have access to a device or reliable WiFi during coronavirus school closures

By KATHLEEN MCWILLIAMS  
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Hartford, CT - When the coronavirus pandemic hit Connecticut in March, forcing schools to rapidly shift to distance learning, Raquel Smith's five children were all given laptops to complete their school work from home. There was just one problem — the internet connection at her Hartford apartment wasn't strong enough to support five simultaneous Zoom calls with teachers, instructional videos and other online programs.

"If three kids were on, it would boot the rest of the kids off or reboot the router. Two of my kids would have to get up at midnight to complete their work," Smith said.

Smith's problem isn't unusual for families who lack the technology that learning at home requires. A new survey released by the state Department of Education shows that 29,000 Connecticut students did not have access to reliable WiFi and 50,000 did not have access to a device.

The issue was even greater in urban school districts, where students were 5 times less likely than their suburban counterparts to have a computer or tablet or phone to do school work on and 3 times less likely to have the necessary WiFi connection.

As the state prepares to reopen schools this fall, the learning divide exacerbated by the pandemic shines new light on an old education story in Connecticut.

"COVID-19 is unprecedented and we're all navigating this for the first time, but the notion of unequal access is not new," state child advocate Sarah Eagan said. "But it is starker and more urgent in the context of this pandemic...the pandemic has laid bare a shameful inequality for our children that is untenable and unsustainable and immoral."

The first step, Eagan said, is for the state to decide whether access to technology is a basic need.

"We have to first and foremost determine whether the state will be responsible for ensuring that all children have access and equal opportunity to engage in education and a meaningful education," she said. "Is technology a luxury in the age of COVID or is it a basic need and a civil right?"

### Technology as a basic need

With a return to distance learning a possibility in the fall, education advocates agree that having a stable wireless connection and a working device is a basic need. To that end, they are hoping to see concrete data on how many children are without technology and how the state plans to address the issue.

Asked about the gaps in technology access, education commissioner Miguel Cardona said the state has identified some strategies for mitigating the digital divide. He said the state will work with districts to close the gap and that local philanthropic initiatives, like the former Partnership for Connecticut, have stepped up to help by providing 60,000 laptops to students who need them by the end of July.

"We have an understanding of what direction we need and what we're finding is that in our opportunity districts the gaps are the greatest," he said. "We're also finding in rural communities, connectivity is an issue."

Eagan said calling a special legislative session to address education inequities, like technology access, highlighted by the coronavirus would give state officials, legislators, experts, parents and school leaders an opportunity to address and solve these issues in a public setting.

"I am concerned that three months into this, we're on month four, we don't know where we are," Eagan said. "We don't know what kids level of participation in school is. We don't yet know what all the barriers are. We don't know who has a

computer and who doesn't...How can we grapple with the enormous policy implications going forward if we don't know where we are?"

**Kathryn Meyer, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy, said in Bridgeport, the school district needed hundreds of devices for students when the pandemic hit. But even students who had Chromebooks often had trouble connecting to the internet or accessing the virtual learning apps.**

**"It's a hard thing to measure and it still is because it's one thing to have a device but now is the device working? Does the device have the ability to download the programs it needs? Does the parent even know how to do these things?" Meyer said. "At least in Bridgeport we had parents who were struggling so much with the device that they wanted to print paper packets."**

**Bridgeport was one district to receive laptops paid for by the former Partnership for Connecticut but the first shipment didn't arrive until mid-May. By that point, students had been doing paper packets for almost two months instead of virtual distance learning.**

**"Bridgeport knew they didn't have enough devices and even as we waited for the laptops donated from [The Partnership for Connecticut] Bridgeport was so underfunded that they couldn't maintain the devices they had," Meyer said. "Thinking and hoping these donated laptops would come sooner than they did, was really hard for the parents."**

### **Lacking internet access**

In Hartford, Milly Arciniegas, who runs Hartford Parent University, a parent led community organization, said 40 percent of students in the city didn't have access to adequate internet connections needed to successfully finish assignments or log into virtual learning.

"We're creating all this virtual learning, but only some people can access it," she said. "You can't say we're giving kids an equal opportunity to education and some kids don't have internet."

As the pandemic wore on through the spring, Smith persisted in trying to get more technology for her five school-age children who were all learning at home.

She went back and forth with Hartford Public Schools and Xfinity trying to get help. Toward the end of the school year, the district gave Smith a mobile hotspot, but it was too late. Her kids, who are in sixth, eighth, ninth, eleventh and twelfth grade, had already missed valuable instructional time and assignments.

Now, as she looks toward the start of school in the fall she worries about the deeper divide created by the pandemic.

"I definitely think that come fall, whatever it may look like, they will be behind," she said.

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