

**Online Learning: What About Students Who Do Not Have Access to the Tools that Are Needed for Online Learning?**  
**Katharine Davies Samway**

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Since the coronavirus pandemic began to affect communities in the U.S., many states have instituted stay-at-home orders, which have led to the closure of schools. In my own state, California, we recently ended three weeks of staying in place, but this was recently extended until May 3, 2020. However, schools will be closed until the end of the school year, if not later in the year. This has led to increased attention to online learning.

Prior to the pandemic, online teaching had become more common at colleges and universities, although in-person classes were still more common. Online teaching was not common in K-12 schools, although students may have used the Internet to do research and complete some assignments, particularly in the upper grades.

The coronavirus pandemic has thrown many districts, schools, and teachers into emergency mode as they attempt to arrange for online learning and teaching. And this is highlighting inequities that exist across schools and districts. For example, in some neighborhoods, most students have access to the Internet at home, whereas in other neighborhoods in the same district, very few students have access to the Internet because families do not have the financial resources to pay for it or their homes are out of range of wireless network towers, which often happens in more rural regions. Similarly, in some schools, most or all students have their own cell phones, but other students do not.

**Finding Out What Is Available to Students and Their Families**

If we have a computer, regular access to the Internet, and a cell phone with unlimited calls and texts, we may forget that or not know if our students have the same access to these tools, which are essential for online learning. In some cases, schools surveyed their students

about their technological needs before the schools closed. In other cases, teachers have had to use time during the school closure to identify students' needs.

Teachers I've interviewed comment on the importance of surveying students and families in order to determine which technological tools they have access to. For example, at Jenny Rienzo's high school, all students completed a paper survey during 2<sup>nd</sup> period, which allowed the school to gauge how many students needed a computer; any absent students were contacted in follow-up calls. According to Rienzo, the school distributed at least 100 Chromebooks before going on spring break, right before the mandated school closure.

At Laura Alvarez' K-8 two-way immersion bilingual school, teachers polled their students by phone, text, and email about their access to a computer and the Internet (and also their access to everyday necessities, such as food). Alvarez estimated that she spent one-third of her time in the two weeks before spring break calling, texting, and emailing students and their families. She learned that most have Internet access via a smartphone, but none of her 8<sup>th</sup> grade students had solid access to the Internet. A couple of her students had a cousin or aunt who had a computer and another student said, "We have one, but I don't think it works." Subsequently, the school has been distributing Chromebooks to students who do not have access to computers, using social distancing when doing so.

It can be very helpful to create a chart or excel file to record what you learn. And, it is helpful to make regular follow-up calls or send text messages. The following is a sample record sheet, but it is important to create one that works for you, so add and revise columns, as needed.

Student's Name	Contacted Student (By phone, email, text?— P/E/T) (Y/N)	Contacted parent/caregiver (By phone, email, text?—P/E/T) (Y/N)	Student has access to working computer (Y/N)	Student has access to Internet (Y/N)	Student has access to cell phone (With unlimited calls & texts?) (Y/N)	Comments

**Signs that Students May Not Have Any or Infrequent Access to Online Learning**

There are many possible signs that students do not have access to online learning, including consistent access. These include: a) students do not log in to student portals or complete assignments, and b) students (and parents/caregivers) do not respond to teachers’ calls, texts, and/or emails.

***Students Do Not Log in to Student Portals or Complete Assignments.***

It is important to find out why students aren’t working online. Teachers have told me that they use text messaging and phone calls, often multiple times, to find out what is happening and if students (and their families) need help. They have found that there are several causes, including the following:

***Lack of Access to Computers***

In some schools, all students have access to laptops, often Chromebooks. In others, there may be one or two carts, each with 30 laptops, used by the entire school, and purchased so that students can take the mandated statewide standardized tests. Also, many students, particularly those who are in the primary grades, are new immigrants, and/or live in low-income homes, do not have access to a computer.

In other cases, students may have a computer, but it doesn't work or it's old and cannot accommodate the software that is required to complete online assignments. In other cases, students have irregular access to a computer, often because parents who are now required to work at home need them to complete their work in order to bring home a paycheck and feed and house their families—I spoke with several teachers who are experiencing this themselves. In still other homes, there is a computer, but there are several children living in the home and the computer isn't available to each child on a regular or sustained basis.

Many schools, districts, and colleges are scrambling to get computers into the hands of students who do not have them. Sometimes they acquire the computers through surveying school staff to identify any laptops that can be made available to students. For example, at Marina Aminy's community college, instructors and staff were contacted to see how many computers could be made available to students. About 500 laptops were identified and taken to the library, where they were cleaned, reimaged, and given a bar code. The library then created a drive-through so students could easily borrow laptops.

Some businesses have been donating laptops to schools. For example, in early April, Google announced that it is donating 4,000 laptops to California students in greatest need (<https://twitter.com/sundarpichai/status/1245436573946019840>). However, if families do not have access to the Internet, their children will not be able to engage in online learning.

#### *Lack of Access to the Internet*

Although many students and their families have cell phones, they may not have access to the Internet. Some school districts are working on setting up Wi-Fi hotspots and purchasing mobile hotspot devices, which they lend to students. For example, Bridgett O'Shea is a literacy specialist in a small district, which has purchased Wi-Fi hotspots. It is also encouraging students

to come to the location where the district is providing food each day because there's a hotspot there. Her district has also used robocalls in English and Spanish to find out what families and students need and to share what the district is doing to support students and their families.

In cases where this is not happening, it is a good idea to check to see if local Internet companies are providing free Internet access during the coronavirus epidemic. However, make sure to let families know that, once the epidemic is over, the Internet provider will be asking for payment for continuing service and that they need to make sure they know when this will happen. Also, the free service is not likely to include cable service, although some companies offer one month of free cable access—the same holds true for paid service once any free service has expired.

Information about some of these offers can be found on the March 16, 2020 USA Today website at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2020/03/16/utility-cable-internet-phone-coronavirus-covid-19/5060084002/>. They include the following:

- Comcast is offering free access to its Xfinity Wi-Fi hot spots until about mid-May.
- AT&T is providing free access to its public Wi-Fi hot spots.
- Charter Communications is providing free Spectrum broadband and Wi-Fi Internet access through mid-May to households with K-12 students or college students who don't already have a subscription. It is also offering Wi-Fi hot spots for free to the public.

This link also describes how other organizations (e.g., some gas and electric companies), are handling the inability to pay for service due to loss of jobs or reduced hours because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Another resource that may be helpful is the FCC's website as they have initiated the Keep Americans Connected Pledge, which asks companies to do the following:

- Not terminate service to any residential or small business because of their inability to pay their bills due to the coronavirus pandemic;
- Waive any late fees that any residential or small business customers incur because of their economic circumstances related to the coronavirus epidemic; and
- Open its Wi-Fi hotspots to any American who needs them

(Source: <https://www.fcc.gov/keep-americans-connected>)

The FCC includes a list of over 600 companies that have signed the pledge.

Another source that may be useful for people looking for Wi-Fi hotspots is Wi-Fi Maps. Access to free Wi-Fi hotspots in hundreds of U.S. towns and cities can be found at <https://www.wifimap.io/countries/234-united-states-free-wifi>. However, it is possible that some of the businesses on the maps have closed and have discontinued their Internet service due to the coronavirus pandemic.

#### *Limited or No Access to Cell Phones*

Cell phones are owned by large numbers of adults and young adults, including recent immigrants, for whom cell phones are often a lifeline to distant family members. Because of this, many people assume that students can use cell phones to complete schoolwork. However, families may not have plans with unlimited text messages, calls, and data because these plans can be very expensive, which hinders students' ability to engage in online learning opportunities such as video chats with their teacher(s) and peers, which can eat up minutes. Some teachers report having success with the free app, WhatsApp, which allows for phone calls, text messages, and videos; the WhatsApp website indicates that it now also offers four-person group audio and video calling.

Many students, particularly younger children, do not have a cell phone, but may be able to use the cell phone of a parent, sibling, relative, and/or caregiver, although not on a regular basis. Laura Alvarez found that about two-thirds of her 8<sup>th</sup> grade students had access to their own cell phones, but the remaining one-third would have to borrow a sibling's or parent's phone, which could be tricky if parents were at work and their cell phone wasn't available and/or siblings had to use the phone for their own online learning. In addition, students may have difficulty completing assignments on a cell phone, which is often the case with assignments that require a lot of writing.

#### *Lack of Familiarity with the Tools and Software*

If students already have experience with using laptops to complete school assignments, they are unlikely to experience the kinds of stress that many other students (and parents/caregivers) are encountering in these early days of online instruction. Laura Alvarez has been using the Seesaw app to post assignments and all but three students have managed to get on it and have done assignments. However, Alvarez shared that she was concerned about the three students who have not been doing the Seesaw assignments as they are the students who struggle the most. In order to help them, she is now using Raz-Kids with these students; it is a leveled e-books app where students can hear a story, read it to themselves, and complete related assignments.

If a student has Internet access, the teacher can videoconference or use screenshots to walk a student through the setting up of and navigating through an unfamiliar app. Alvarez also texts screen shots and uses them to explain assignments to students who are confused; she also talks them through online directions.

Teachers working with students with learning disabilities have commented on the difficulties that their students face when having to learn online. Many schools use Chromebooks and, on its website, Google provides updates on how to make Chromebooks more accessible for students with learning disabilities: (<https://www.blog.google/outreach-initiatives/education/chromebook-accessibility-covid19/>).

### **Students (and Parents/Caregivers) Do Not Respond to Teachers' Calls, Texts, and/or Emails.**

When students and/or parents/caregivers do not respond to attempts to contact them, it is possible that the students' and parents' email addresses and phone numbers are not current. In these cases, it is important to become a sleuth and try to obtain more current contact information, for example, through other students and their families. Of course, this has to be done very carefully and respectfully so as not to cause any anxiety or embarrassment to the families or students.

Another possibility is that services have been disconnected due to non-payment of bills, something that is likely to happen with greater frequency now that millions of people in the U.S. are unemployed—see the section above, *Lack of Access to the Internet*, for suggestions on how to help families get free Internet and/or cell phone service.

Although the government has announced the Coronavirus Relief Bill, many families will not benefit from this stopgap support because they are undocumented, even though they typically pay taxes. Also, people who are gig workers, self-employed workers, and small business owners are not typically eligible for unemployment benefits, but some states have announced changes in the rules due to the pandemic's impact on joblessness. Rhode Island is an example



(<https://www.providencejournal.com/news/20200406/finally-ri-can-start-rolling-out-new-jobless-benefits>).

In other cases, such as in many immigrant families, parents may not speak much or any English. If this is the case and you do not speak the home language of the student and parent/caregiver, it is important to seek the help of an interpreter when making phone contact with families—many phones have the capacity for conference calls whereby the teacher, interpreter, and parent can talk on a single call, all speaking from their homes.

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