RCSD to offer students free home internet access via hot spot devices

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The Rochester City School District will offer free home internet access to any high school student who lacks it beginning in September, it announced Monday. It's the culmination of a yearslong campaign to bring all district students into the internet age.

RCSD was chosen to participate in the 1Million Project Foundation, affiliated with telecommunication provider Sprint. Every student lacking reliable home internet access will be given a MiFi hot spot with 10 gigabytes of high-speed data per month, then an unlimited amount of data at a slower speed after that.

RCSD Chief Information Officer Annmarie Lehner estimated that more than 4,000 students in grades 9-12 will receive the devices in the fall. The mobile hot spots can be used in conjunction with district-owned Chromebook laptops, which are now provided to every student in the classroom.

The plan will cost the district noth-

ing and has no end date, with each incoming class of ninth graders getting hot spots if they need them.

"It's almost too good to be true," Lehner said Monday .

The homework gap

As teachers and schools rely more and more on technology in the classroom — assigning and receiving work via email, requiring the use of streaming video for research, posting materials on a private website — students without internet access, particularly in urban and rural areas, risk falling behind. In a 2016 story in the

Democrat and Chronicle,

high school students described huddling outside Starbucks or McDonald's restaurants late at night to use the internet or composing college admissions essays on their cell phones.

"A lot of our work is on Google (software)," World of Inquiry School 58 student Ja'Colby Chapman said. "If I don't have a computer at home, how am I supposed to finish it?"

Lehner has tried every avenue imaginable to solve the dilemma, known as the "homework gap," including an ambitious plan to build a citywide fiber optic network. At every step the district has run into logistical, financial or political roadblocks.

About 60% of RCSD students lack reliable internet at home, Lehner estimated, and there are 7,700 secondary students in the district.

A basic essential tool

The Sprint program will serve them and also families where people are trying to use multiple devices at once and the service cannot keep up. Students keep the devices until they leave school.

"Right now, kids get a lot of their homework through Google Classroom and have to try to stay after school or do it in the morning," she said. "We're not providing our kids with anything more than they deserve. ... These are the very basic tools they need to succeed."

Hundreds of thousands of students across the country have already received access through the 1Million Program, according to Sprint. The goal is to reach 1 million students. The program is 3 years old but has apparently increased its growth rate this year as Sprint and TMobile seek regulatory approval for a massive merger. T-Mobile pledged in February to support the program as well. The district is responsible for ensuring that most of the devices are being used but will not monitor content, Lehner said. There will be some extra devices included in case of loss or damage.

While RCSD now uses its Chromebooks in classrooms, it now will redeploy them for high school students to use at home instead. Besides a filter for pornography and malware, there are no restrictions on how the devices can be used at home, meaning adults in homes without internet access will benefit as well.

The rollout will begin with four high schools in September, Lehner said. All students in grades 912 should have a hot spot, if they need one, by the end of 2019.

School No. 33 students Zavian Curry, 9, and Kameron Haskell, 8, at the Sully Public Library in 2016. They had to read for at least 15 minutes before being allowed to access computers. FILE PHOTO