

# Schools bridge the digital divide with MiFi

Devices help students access internet for free

**Adria R. Walker**

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The Rochester City School District will keep distributing MiFi devices known as hot spots to help students who are struggling to access the internet.

It's a continuation of the district's September 2019 distribution. As reported last June, RCSD began hot spot distribution efforts last year by offering free internet access to high school students.

ROC the Future studied the Digital Divide in Rochester in a report published on April 17 of this year. According to census data, 88% of Rochestarians have some type of computer, smartphone or wireless device and 80% have some type of internet subscription. However, 17% of residents rely solely on a cellular data plan.

"That's why the MiFi units are really important," said Stephanie Townsend, director of research and analytics at ROC the Future. "The kids need not only the device, but then (they need) to get online."

Townsend said having access to a smartphone does not necessarily ensure that students are able to adequately access and use online learning tools. For example, students might have a smartphone, but it would be difficult to use the device to write a term paper or analyze Excel data.

Additionally, students might have a smartphone, but they have a limited family data plan.

"A lot of people (have) cell service through a hot spot on their phone," she explained, "so, if there's a parent working at home, if you have a couple of kids trying to do their schooling at home, they quickly run out of their data for the month."

Act CDBG funding.

Townsend said that the delay in supplying younger students with internet and with devices potentially created a learning gap. RCSD provided worksheet packets every week at food distribution sites, along with providing learning materials weekly online. But, Townsend said, this was only for students who had the ability to access the online materials. The distribution of the MiFi devices helps close this gap.

"Because it took a while to get this down to the lower grades, there was, unfortunately, a substantial delay, so those kids still lost a lot of learning time... We know there's always learning loss in the summer, but these kids are essentially going from mid-March to August with no regular school instruction, so that's going to be more impactful on the younger grades where they didn't have the online learning," Townsend said.

With schools potentially reopening in the fall, Vanderwater believes that providing students with MiFi devices will be beneficial in the chance that school buildings close — or that don't reopen because of COVID-19

*Adria R. Walker covers public education for the Democrat and Chronicle in partnership with Report for America. Follow her on Twitter at @adriawalkr or send her an email at arwalker@gannett.com.*

RCSD has been able to distribute the devices through a partnership with the 1Million Project. Initially, the 1Million Project supplied the district with approximately 2,000 MiFi devices used to reach families most in need of internet service, according to Glen Vanderwater, the district's executive director of institutional technology. Since those devices were deployed last year, 1Million Project has delivered another 5,700 MiFi devices that are currently being deployed.

The MiFi devices come at no cost to the district. Vanderwater said that the 1Million project ships the devices and provides the internet connectivity for free.

Additionally, he says the organization is fairly liberal in determining who qualifies for a device. "For example, if there were siblings in a home and not everyone could be on a Zoom meeting at the same time, each sibling would qualify for a MiFi device," he said.

Vanderwater said that the partnership between the 1Million Project and RCSD has been so successful that the 1Million Project is using Rochester's model as an example from districts across the country.

Last autumn, with the 1Million Project, RCSD distributed the MiFi devices and Chromebooks to eligible high school students, giving them internet access. In April, following the March 13 school closure, RCSD gave out Chromebooks to students in the sixth through eighth grade and to high school students who had not yet picked up devices. Fourth- and fifth-grade students were able to pick up Chromebooks in June.

According to data provided by Townsend, 6,387 RCSD students in grades nine through twelve have received Chromebooks. That number is 4,094 for sixth through eighth-grade students. 2,000 RCSD students are to be supported by the City of Rochester CARES



**Sheldon Cox, left, and Randall Schenk, lead teachers in the Rochester City School District Instructional Technology Department, distribute MiFi devices. PHOTOS BY JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE**



**MiFi devices are scanned and distributed for students in RCSD to be able to connect to the internet and participate in remote learning if in-person classes are delayed because of the coronavirus pandemic.**

