

Internet gaps in NY cities complicate remote learning

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For the past few weekdays, Crystal Berroa woke up in the morning not knowing how to help her two young daughters attend school remotely.

Berroa lives in a shelter in New York City and repeatedly tried to contact school officials to help her daughters log into remote learning classrooms on school-issued iPads.

So far, she hasn't gotten anywhere.

"If one (iPad) connects and the other doesn't, I'm screwed," Berroa said. "There's nothing I can do. Sometimes it doesn't connect at all during the day. My daughter is a first-grader. She's learning how to read right now. And I have no idea what's going on."

Berroa's family is one of thousands across New York who have struggled with the transition to remote learning because of internet access or connectivity issues in metropolitan areas.

The problem is amplified this school year by the COVID-19 pandemic that forced New York's largest school districts to start the fall semester online, often in the state's poorest communities.

For the past five years, New York has focused on rural broadband, awarding grants to small internet providers to bring a stable connection to remote corners of New York.

But even the largest cities have dead zones, with no major internet providers available. In areas where service is available, it may be unreliable or too expensive for some families to afford.

Data on broadband availability, quality and cost isn't precise, and that's keeping New York from truly addressing its digital gaps, community advocates and lawmakers argued in a letter to Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Monday. They urged him to sign the Comprehensive Broadband

By the numbers

Multiple factors influence a family's ability to secure a stable internet connection at home:

h Poverty plays a role: 38% of all New York households earning \$25,000 or less have no high-speed home internet connection, according to an analysis of the 2018 Census data by Future Ready Schools, a network of nonprofits and research groups.

h Cities aren't exempt: 20% of households in New York metro areas don't have high-speed internet; nearly 750,000 students live in those households, the group said.

h A problem in upstate cities:

Large swathes of residents in upstate cities have no home broadband access, according to National Digital Inclusion



The Sepulveda kids do school work under remote learning conditions Sept. 25 in the dining room of their home in Rochester. Clockwise from front left are Reinaldo, ninth grade; Jeremiah,

Connectivity Act, which would compel the Public Service Commission to collect data on high-speed internet in the state.

With many school districts conducting partial or full remote learning this fall, especially in low income areas, a lack of stable internet at home could jeopardize the only connection teachers have to those students.

“In some neighborhoods (in New York City) as many as 40% of schoolchildren could not afford the kind of high speed broadband they needed to participate in remote learning,” said Bob Master, political director for the powerful union, the Communication Workers of America Northeast, during a recent webinar on broadband access in New York.

Alliance data. In Syracuse, 32% of households had no broadband connection of any type; in Rochester, it was 20%, and Buffalo was 19%.

Families adjust to online learning

Families without home internet access often turn to community spaces like libraries — but many of those were closed until recently and still have capacity and technology restrictions related to COVID- 19.

In March, the Monroe County Library System, which operates over 30 locations in the greater Rochester area, lent 500 mobile WiFi hotspots to patrons and families who didn’t have home internet connections. “We knew these challenges were coming,” said Adam Traub, the library system’s associate director. “Libraries have frequently been points of access for the internet, and we take that role really seriously. Especially during COVID-19, we’ve really tried to step up our efforts.” In Rochester’s downtown Central Library, it’s not uncommon to see grade school students set up in study areas with their Chromebooks and headphones, working on classwork with a parent or sibling supervising nearby. Trachelle Bivins and her 5-year-old son Ondrae Florence sat in the corner of a library’s large room study area, coloring sheets spread out in front of Ondrae’s Chromebook.

The two come to the library almost every day, usually at 10 a.m. when the doors open. Bivins sits next to her son for about six hours, guiding

eighth grade; Reina, a senior; Jacob, fifth grade; and Rihanna, seventh grade.

SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Customers pay a \$160 installation fee, followed by a suggested donation of \$20 per month for service, if they can afford it, Hall said. The group is currently wiring 600 apartments in Grand Street Guild, a three-tower affordable housing complex on the Lower East Side. Spending time connecting large apartment buildings is the fastest way to reach the largest number of lower-income residents.

“We’re focused on connecting people, and doing that in the cheapest, most efficient way possible,” Hall said.

Students in those target households are often also experiencing poverty and homelessness, leaving advocates concerned that COVID-19 and the shift to further remote learning will present yet another hurdle for them.

The state’s Big 5 districts — New York City, Yonkers, Syracuse, Rochester and Buffalo — all started the school year online, while wealthier districts mainly have had at least some in-person learning.

New York City changed its reopening plans just days before inperson learning was to begin on Sept. 21. Students started in-person classes last week.

Homeless students are of particular concern for online learning, many of whom live in shelters with no internet access, advocates said.

him through his days in remote kindergarten at Rochester' School No. 23. She brings a plastic bin full of activity sheets, juice, snacks, pencils and crayons, and anything else Ondrae might need. Ondrae moved to a new school this fall, but hasn't been able to meet any of his teachers or classmates in person — Rochester schools will conduct remote learning for the first 10 weeks of the year. Bivins was apprehensive at first.

“I was wondering, ‘How are they going to have gym? How are they going to do that?’ ” she said. “My first thought was, ‘I’m just going to teach him.’ But once we got to try (remote learning), it wasn’t as bad as I thought. It’s not like they’re sitting there all day ... they give them times to get up and move and take breaks.”

Though the family has an internet connection at home, Bivins' two younger children are often home, making it a difficult environment for Ondrae's learning.

The library offers a quiet, isolated space with a strong internet connection so he can focus, Bivins said.

Down the hall from Bivins and Ondrae sat Boona and Gammachis Duresso, of Brighton. Boona, 9, a fourth-grade Rochester student, watched a math lesson on his Chromebook screen while older brother Gammachis looked on.

The family recently moved to Brighton, a suburb east of Rochester, and had yet to install a broadband internet connection in their new home.

The Brighton library isn't currently offering wireless connection to customers inside the building, so the brothers ended up at Central Library so Boona could attend his classes for the day.

During the spring peak of the pandemic shutdown, when students were just figuring out remote learning, parents might park outside closed libraries to access the Wi-Fi signal so their kids could do schoolwork, Traub said.

Now, libraries are offering limited computers with extended evening hours in some locations. Some branches are working on partnerships with local schools to offer inperson classwork help to students.

“Remote learning has not been going effectively and well for all students,” said Raysa Rodriguez, associate executive director at the Citizens' Committee for Children.

Upstate districts bridging gap

The Rochester City School District, in a city that has one of highest rates of child poverty in the nation, was already working on the local digital divide when COVID-19 hit.

According to a survey by the group Roc the Future earlier this year, 20% of Rochester residents had no internet connection of any type, and 17% had only a cellular data connection.

That means 37% of Rochester homes did not have an internet environment that's conducive to remote learning.

Thanks to the 1Million project, a national initiative to increase student internet access, the Rochester district secured 12,000 mobile WiFi hotspots for Rochester students in the past year, which allow them to connect devices to a mobile wireless network.

Additionally, the district lent Chromebook tablets to every student in grades four through 12 to facilitate online assignments and remote learning.

The Syracuse City School District also distributed 8,000 learning devices and 500 mobile hotspots, with hundreds more still waiting to be picked up.

But Rochester is still a long way from equitable internet access, said Glen VanDerwater, the district's executive director of instructional technology.

Even though most Rochester neighborhoods are covered by at least one of the major area internet service providers — Frontier Communications, Spectrum or Greenlight Networks — the high-speed broadband packages offered are either not available or not affordable for some families in lower-income neighborhoods, VanDerwater said.

“Internet is not reaching our families in the greatest of need,” he said.

Despite the efforts, the public appears to remain wary of COVID-19 in gathering spaces. “Folks aren’t necessarily ready to come back,” Traub said. “It’s been a slow reopening.”

Remote learning not effective for all

In New York City, perhaps the state’s most polarized example of the digital divide, an estimated 500,000 households don’t have access to the internet, according to nonprofit advocacy organization Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York. About 100,000 schoolage students do not have internet services, and 80,000 report not having a device with which to access the internet, even if they have a connection.

“In New York City, where most people have access in most cases to multiple providers, you have a very serious affordability crisis,” Master said. Most New Yorkers have one or perhaps two choices out of the major providers in the area, like Spectrum or Verizon Fios.

But those networks can be prone to outages and create an “oligopoly pricing” scenario, as Brian Hall, organizer at the wireless network NYC Mesh, calls it. Some pockets of the city have no access to any major internet providers.

NYC Mesh launched in 2014 as a volunteer-run wireless network provider meant to bring highspeed, low-cost internet access to New York neighborhoods.

In the spring, Spectrum offered 60 days of free Wi-Fi to families with K-12 students who didn’t already have a Spectrum internet subscription.

The company renewed that offer in mid-September, and last week introduced Stay Connected K-12, a broadband program that will allow school districts to help students secure an internet connection.

But that only gets families without internet access a brief reprieve.

People who can’t access the internet for the school year can’t use things like online classrooms, online health charts or online banking.

“As these utilities begin to develop without the input of our entire community, that utility is going to be built in a way that’s going to exclude their input,” VanDerwater said.

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