# For thousands of students without home internet access, remote learning is an extra challenge

By Rachel Ohm Staff Writer

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East End Community School principal Boyd Marley greets a student through a car window as families picked up lunches and hot spots as needed last Tuesday in Portland. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

Staff at Portland's Riverton Elementary School were set up in the main entrance of the school last week with stacks of laptops and newly ordered Wi-Fi hot spot devices to distribute to students.

As families pulled up to the school's driveway in their vehicles, they were approached with a series of questions: Do you need a laptop? Do you have internet?

The school staff would then gather what was needed – a laptop, hot spot or both – and deliver it along with instruction sheets available in eight languages.

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"Kids are logging in," said Nancy Sirois, a math coach at Riverton, who said efforts to connect every student at the school with technology for at-home learning are going well.

"We only have a handful who are not checking in or not doing the work. Maybe 10 percent? That's pretty incredible. Are they doing all the work? No, but they're at least connecting with us."

Getting students to connect is one of the first steps in tackling distance learning, something almost all school districts around Maine are being forced to experiment with in the midst of a pandemic that has prompted school closures of a month or longer.

But it's not always easy.

The Maine Department of Education estimates 20 percent of the state's 180,000 pre-K to grade 12 students don't have functional internet at home, either because their families can't afford it, broadband service is not available or a lack of cell service means hot spots won't work.

With schools across the state closed through at least May 1, the lack of internet threatens to worsen inequalities in Maine's education system, especially for students already at risk of falling behind.

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"This is really a humanitarian crisis," said Beth Lambert, coordinator of secondary education and integrated instruction at the Maine Department of Education. "We have students who have no access. We will never make progress around equity and closing the achievement gap if we can't close the digital divide. And so my hope is that this is bringing that to light for people who are decision makers."

Maine is not alone in facing a challenge in trying to deliver education to large numbers of students now forced to study at home without access to the internet or technology.

Nationwide 18 percent of people between the ages of 3 and 18 lack home internet access, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

A 2018 report by the center found that technology is becoming increasingly integral in K-12 education, regardless of the current coronavirus pandemic.

It also found broadband access is a problem especially in rural areas and that black and Hispanic students and low-income students around the country are less likely to have access to technology at home. And it found that students without home internet access had lower assessment scores in reading, math and science.

The problem nationally prompted U.S. Sen. Angus King, I-Maine, and other lawmakers last week to call for $2 billion in coronavirus relief funding to increase Wi-Fi access for students.

A school department worker greets families picking up lunches and or hot spots at East End Community School in Portland on Tuesday. Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer

In Portland Public Schools, the state's largest school district with 6,700 students, a survey sent to parents just before schools closed revealed about 350 families without internet access at home.

Schools around Portland have spent the last two weeks distributing devices or hot spots – more than 1,000 as of early last week – and fixing problems for students who have run into technical difficulties getting set up to learn from home.

At East End Community School, Principal Boyd Marley estimated about 150 devices were distributed during the first week of school closures. The school had about 60 people signed up Tuesday to pick up either devices or hot spots.

"The need was bigger than people anticipated, so we did a second round," Marley said. "I don't think we anticipated all the hot spots we would need."

As vehicles pulled through the school's driveway, Susan Wiggin, the district's liaison for homeless students, stopped to pick up a laptop to deliver to a student in need.

"Hot spot distribution is so important," Wiggin said. "Particularly at the (homeless) family shelter, there is no internet connectivity ever for students. So that's one of the biggest pushes right now. We want to make sure everyone has the technology they need to access

what they need."

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Portland is one of the most diverse school districts in Maine, with 64 languages spoken by students and 23 percent of the student population considered English language learners. Several families at both the Riverton and East End distribution sites last week did not speak English and were picking up instructions for the laptops in other languages.

Some parents, like Jenna Hayes, the mother of a second-grader and seventh-grader, choose not to have internet at home, though Hayes said she thinks she's in the minority. She came to get a hot spot at Riverton after having trouble accessing a Spectrum internet offer.

"My friends think I'm crazy," said Hayes, who said she chooses not to have internet because she doesn't want her children constantly plugged in.

In other places around the state, the pandemic has highlighted the lack of high-speed broadband, especially in rural Maine.

The Federal Communications Commission estimates 7 percent of Maine's population is without home broadband, a number similar to the national connectivity rate of 93 percent.

Peggy Schaffer, executive director of ConnectMaine, a government project aimed at expanding broadband access, said it's hard to know how much of the state lacks broadband access because the federal data is based on advertised speed, not what is actually delivered.

Dan Lavey, a special education ed tech, carries laptops out to the parent of a student at Riverton Elementary School last week. The equipment came with instruction sheets available in eight languages as the Portland district sought to meet its kids' needs. *Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer*

Additionally, the data is based on service to census blocks, which may be small in urban areas but can encompass hundreds of square miles in remote areas, and doesn't necessitate that every household in the block receive service in order to be counted as such.

ConnectMaine estimates the portion of the state without adequate access to broadband to be greater, around at least 83,000 households, or 12 to 13 percent, and that it would take a $600 million investment to connect all of Maine to broadband.

In the Franklin County town of Strong, Tammy Paradis doesn't have broadband at her home. So she has resorted to taking her children to her downtown Farmington business, a candy store that is currently closed, so they can access a faster connection.

"If we were in the woods I might understand a little bit better," said Paradis, who lives a few miles from downtown Farmington on Route 4. "If we were extremely rural – which I know some places are – I would understand the hold-up, but this has been years in the making."

She said her son's high school, Mount Abram High School, has been understanding. The school offered to help set the family up with a hot spot, but the lack of cell service meant it didn't work. So teachers have been putting together paper packets that Paradis' husband picks up and brings home.

Her oldest daughter, a sophomore at the University of Southern Maine who is now at home, and her stepdaughter, who attends Waterville Senior High School, have also struggled.

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"It's been very stressful," Paradis said. "With everything else going on it's definitely the last thing I want to have to worry about. My kids love school, luckily, so they really want to be able to do all the things their friends are doing and it sucks we can't offer them that right now."

Because so much of Maine is rural and broadband is not a regulated utility, many providers have not made investments in large swaths of the state. In some places that has started to change, as communities strive to secure funding as part of economic development efforts. But Schaffer said there is still work to be done. The authority is hoping voters will approve a $15 million bond to expand broadband access that is scheduled to go to voters statewide in June.

"A number of us including some legislators and communities have been sort of sounding the alarm on this," Schaffer said. "It is unfortunate it took this kind of crisis to rip the cover off and have everyone else say, 'This is a problem,' but there is an opportunity in this to understand and invest."

In the meantime, schools and parents have been coming up with patchwork solutions. The University of Maine System launched an initiative last month to extend Wi-Fi signals outside of school buildings at 140 locations around the state so families could study in parking lots.

Still, "it's not really a feasible option to sit at the school parking lot all day having my kids do school," Paradis said.

Some companies like Spectrum have also offered free 60-day internet services to families who are not already customers, though the offer is not available for those with outstanding bills or past delinquent accounts.

Arianna Gordon works on her college classwork remotely while sitting in her parents' candy shop in Farmington on Wednesday. Gordon is a sophomore theater major at the University of Southern Maine and struggles to work remotely from her home in Strong because of the slow internet connection. *Daryn Slover/Sun Journal*

In Bangor, Superintendent Betsy Webb said the district has been fundraising to raise enough money to provide hot spots for 350 students who either lack internet, devices or both at home. Early last week they were $25,000 toward a $60,000 goal.

"Social distancing has made us have to rely on technology," Webb said. "We want to get that up and running as soon as possible so our learners, teachers and other school personnel are able to capitalize on the benefits of technology."

For the Maine Department of Education, the pandemic has further emphasized the need for work around technology and internet access that was already underway as the state heads toward developing the second phase of the Maine Learning Technology Initiative, which currently provides a laptop to every seventh- and eighth-grade student.

In October, the department is hoping to put out a request for proposals for the next phase of the initiative, which first launched in the early 2000s, and is currently at work exploring what the state will be able to provide schools going forward.

As part of that work the department is in the process of gathering data from districts around the state about student internet and technology access, a process that has been

expedited as the department scrambles to address the current lack of access many schools are facing.

Existing data on broadband shows that at least 5,300 of the state's 180,000 students don't have access. That number, however, doesn't include homeless students or students who don't have internet for other reasons.

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The broadband access problem is worst in Piscataquis County, where 18 percent of the county's roughly 2,100 students lack access.

Waldo County, meanwhile, has the highest number of students without broadband, with more than 900 of the county's 5,057 students without access.

In Cumberland and York counties, less than 1 percent of students are without broadband, but that doesn't mean internet and technology access is not a problem.

In the Westbrook School Department, Superintendent Peter Lancia said middle and high school students are equipped with one-to-one devices, but about 20 percent of elementary students either don't have a device or don't have internet at home.

For the first two weeks of at-home learning, the school district provided more traditional pencil and paper work for elementary school students supplemented with optional online learning. They are working to distribute devices to students who don't have them and broaden access to Wi-Fi, Lancia said.

"Having access to technology really is essential, not just in a crisis but every day," Lancia said. The pandemic "is kind of revealing some things we have to pay attention to in the future, like having universal access to technology."

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