

FOR THE EXCLUSIVE USE OF PUBLICAFFAIRS@PHOENIXCHAMBER.COM

From the Phoenix Business Journal:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/phoenix/news/2020/08/07/arizonans-can-help-students-bridge-digital-divide.html>

Our View

Our View: Let's all come together to close digital divide for Arizona students

Aug 7, 2020, 4:15am MST

The Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent changes to daily life have highlighted Arizona's strengths and emphasized our pre-existing challenges, including the vast digital divide present in our state.

Arizona's schools closed their physical locations to students in March. This abrupt and unexpected change shifted students from in-person learning to remote classrooms.

More than 1 million students and 50,000 teachers had to transform how they were expected to teach, learn, and connect, almost overnight.

While this change was necessary, it created incredible challenges across Arizona.

In March, it was estimated that Arizona students needed more than 100,000 laptops to facilitate online learning. In response to this change, leaders responded immediately to collect, refurbish, and distribute laptops through the Greater Phoenix Chamber Foundation's ElevateEdAZ Community Laptop Drive. Over 1,000 laptops have been provided to students over the last two months at no cost to families.



GETTY IMAGES (ARIEL SKELLEY)

In March, it was estimated that Arizona students needed more than 100,000 laptops to facilitate online learning.

But laptops and other learning devices are only part of the equation. Students and families also need access to affordable, high-quality broadband to participate in today's digital world. According to BroadbandNow, Arizona ranked 36th nationally for broadband access in 2018. And while more than 90% of homes have access to broadband, according to Bortz Media, adoption is still a significant barrier.

In recent years, state and local business leaders have increased efforts to improve broadband access and adoption across the state, and local internet providers have been diligent in their efforts to expand access and adoption through programs such as Connect2Compete, a low-cost internet service for low-income families.

There's still more to be done.

It's clear that a lack of access to devices and internet limits students' ability to learn in a digital world. According to the Arizona Department of Education, nearly 200,000 students can't access reliable internet at home or in their community, just as the state is preparing its criteria for a return to the classroom this fall.

This is why leaders across the state are working to close the digital divide. Phoenix Mayor Kate Gallego and other city leaders, are committed to expanding broadband access to individuals throughout Arizona. In Phoenix, Mayor Gallego is working with local schools, including Phoenix Union High School District, to increase device and internet access to students across the Valley.

While it's unclear exactly what school will look like in the new school year, it's very clear that closing the digital divide for Arizona's students will be critical to educating Arizona's students now and in the future. This means that policymakers at the federal and state levels need to invest in increasing access to devices and broadband. Dedicating authorized funding from the CARES Act for this purpose is a good start, but more needs to be done to ensure that our children can stay connected beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.

Let's band together and make 2020 the year that Arizona closes the digital divide and gets all students — and families — connected to quality learning opportunities that prepare them for college and career.

Kate Gallego is mayor of Phoenix; Kathy Hoffman is state superintendent of public instruction; Todd Sanders is president & CEO, Greater Phoenix Chamber

Foundation.