

## Remote Learning and the Digital Divide



### What's the Issue?

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Connecticut and the governor ordered all public schools closed for in-person classes, school districts had to immediately craft plans to enable students to continue to learn from home. This was an unprecedented challenge for the state and its public school districts.

In addition to the challenges of training teachers to give lessons remotely and of students learning remotely, districts had to address the issue of thousands of students lacking computer devices or reliable internet service.

### *The Digital Divide*

This gap in access to devices and internet service, often referred to as the digital divide, had been an ongoing issue in education, but the pandemic abruptly brought it to the forefront. A State Department of Education (SDE) [survey](#) released in June found that the lack of devices and connectivity was disproportionately a problem in the Opportunity Districts, which are the state's 10 lowest performing school districts and include most of the state's largest cities. Though these 10 districts enroll about 20% of the statewide student population, they account for 44% of all students needing devices and 35% of those needing internet access at home.

### Connecting Students to Remote Education

While many school districts distribute Chromebooks or iPads to their students as a standard procedure, many others do not. Since the pandemic began, the state and a philanthropic organization (the now-defunct Partnership for Connecticut) have distributed the following:

- 60,000 laptops over the summer to school districts with a higher percentage of students eligible for free or reduced priced meals,
- 82,000 Chromebooks and laptops over the fall and early winter,
- nearly 13,000 internet hotspot devices, and
- broadband internet access thru either cable providers or free public hotspots (see next page for more details).

Click [here](#) for a distribution list of laptops by school district and [here](#) for a distribution list of hotspot devices.

## Funding for Connectivity

The state designated [\\$42 million](#) in federal CARES Act money for devices and connectivity. The CARES Act includes three different programs from which these funds were drawn:

- \$22 million from the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF)
- \$15 million from the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund, and
- \$5 million from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund.

In addition, \$4.5 million from the CRF was designated for public WiFi hotspots. School Districts may also choose to use some of the CARES Act funding they received through the state for devices or connectivity, as long as the spending meets program requirements.

## Top 10 Districts that Received Laptops or Chromebooks

District	Total Devices
New Haven School District	17,631
Bridgeport School District	15,256
Hartford School District	11,140
Waterbury School District	9,021
Stamford School District	8,261
Danbury School District	4,324
Norwalk School District	4,324
Groton School District	4,251
Meriden School District	3,205

## Three Ways to be Connected to the Internet: Broadband Providers, Fixed Community Hotspots and Mobile Hotspots

Through the governor’s [Everybody Learns](#) Initiative, free internet connections are being provided in three ways: (1) state contracts with broadband providers Altice USA, Atlantic Broadband, Comcast, Cox, and Charter (Spectrum); (2) fixed hotspots in 20 urban and 20 rural communities; and (3) nearly 13,000 mobile hotspot devices. SDE encourages families to contact their local school district for information on internet connectivity.

The broadband providers are under contract to provide internet service to families that are not already customers of the provider. The community hotspots around the state, implemented by a partnership of the Department of Administrative Services’ Commission for Educational Technology and the Connecticut Education Network, will begin to be installed in late November and early December. The community hotspots, which will be available from schools, libraries, and other public buildings, will allow people to drive or walk up and get an internet connection from outside the building. This has the advantage of allowing many people to connect through one location.

A mobile hotspot device can deliver an internet connection for a laptop or other device. The mobile device allows the user to bring the hotspot anywhere that he or she has phone service. That way the user is not dependent upon being in a fixed location in order to have internet access. SDE has provided approximately 12,000 hotspot devices to school districts for distribution.

**Learn  
More**

“State Department of Education 2020-2021 School Reopening Plan,” OLR Report [2020-R-0187](#)

“COVID-19 Executive Orders Affecting Education and Child Care,” OLR Report [2020-R-0111](#)

[Everybody Learns Initiative](#), July 2020

“[Student Participation in Distance Learning: Device/Connectivity Needs, Effective Strategies, Challenges, and State Supports Needed](#),” SDE Survey of School Districts

