

Bridging LA's Digital Divide:

Increasing Access to WiFi and Technology for Low-Income Communities and Communities of Color

During the past month as organizations moved quickly to support students and families in the wake of the spread of COVID-19, many technology and internet companies scrambled to offer "free" internet and wifi services for students and families in low-income communities. Companies like Google, Verizon, AT&T, Comcast and Charter, along with government leaders, started to advertise these deals as ways to bridge the digital divide.

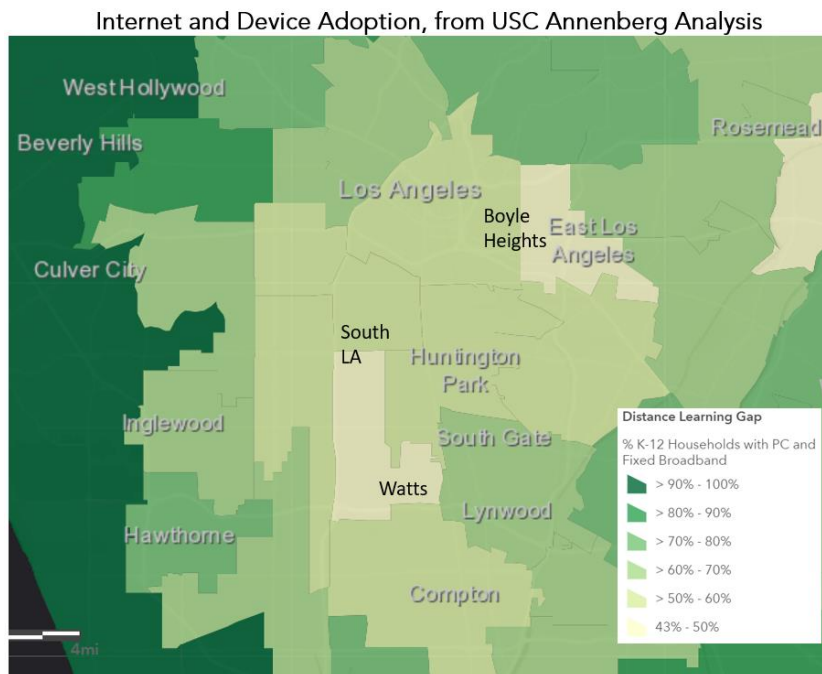
We applaud the collaborative action by government leaders and corporate technology partners to expand internet access and enable distance learning for all California students - regardless of income. In particular, we commend LA Unified's swift decision to allocate \$100 million toward the purchase of new laptops and internet hotspots. This investment is necessary and commendable, and we are encouraged by early progress by LA Unified to increase access in students' homes.

At the same time, we need to monitor the implementation of technology companies' advertised initiatives to ensure they meet the needs of students and families who face the greatest and most urgent barriers to technology access and distance learning. Based on our investigation, we find that most of the offers promoted by technology companies don't yet do enough to connect low-income communities and communities of color in Los Angeles.

As an organization providing on-the-ground support to educators and families in Watts, South LA and Boyle Heights, we are deeply invested in ensuring that promises become reality so that essential technology effectively reaches our students and families. To understand the current needs of our families and the barriers they are facing to access technology, we conducted research in late March and early April:

- We interviewed over 1,000 LA Unified families about their current technology needs
- We made over 50 customer calls to internet companies that are currently promoting special offers to families of LA Unified students

Our findings underscore that despite the current efforts of state and local political leaders and the largest internet companies, the digital divide persists as a real barrier to student learning. In LA Unified, an estimated one-third of students have no broadband internet access at home.ⁱ As a recent USC Annenberg analysis shows (see map), gaps in access are most profound in particular neighborhoods, including the neighborhoods we serve (Watts, South LA and Boyle Heights). Furthermore, "free" internet offers are mostly unavailable to these families or require signing up for contracts that require substantial fees once the trial period ends or paying significant up-front deposits.



In order to make distance learning a reality, we urge leaders to prioritize technology and internet access for the communities with the greatest unmet need first and to remove every barrier possible to students' continued learning.

Partnership's Family Survey - Hearing Directly from Families

In order to learn directly about the experiences of families during this time, we conducted phone surveys with 1,000 families in Watts, South Los Angeles and Boyle Heights between March 24, 2020 and April 4, 2020. We know that phone surveys are not fully representative of the families we serve because they tend to represent families who are easier to reach. Nevertheless, the data reveal some important trends in historically underserved communities that complement the findings of a recent Ed Trust-West parent poll on COVID-19 and school closures.ⁱⁱ Our respondents reported that:

- 20% don't have access to a computer, laptop or iPad for assignments (37% of families in Watts lack access)
- 16% don't have access to internet or WiFi (18% of families in Watts lack access)
- Among the 16% of respondents who don't have access to internet:
 - 41% didn't know about free WiFi offerings from Comcast, Spectrum and Verizon
 - 15% contacted internet companies to try to get service
- Common concerns of families from survey:
 - Parents have tried accessing free internet service through the providers mentioned, but have faced barriers with service (no one answers the phone, or the companies don't have enough technicians to set up internet)
 - Some families cannot access the internet because providers do not service their area
 - Some parents also have multiple children sharing the devices and/or hotspots, which limits use and makes the internet very slow

Detailed findings from the survey can be found [here](#).

Partnership's Survey of Internet Offers - Testing the Promises of Internet Companies

Prompted by the findings of our family survey, we investigated the offers and support provided by prominent internet companies in Los Angeles. Our staff acted as potential customers in Watts (the neighborhood with the greatest gaps in access) and made 50 calls to internet companies that are promoting special offers.

We found significant discrepancies between what has been promoted and advertised by the internet companies and what callers experienced in trying to sign up for service. Highlights from our findings:

- AT&T is the only provider that provides home internet service throughout the Watts 90002 zip code
- Average wait time on calls to speak with customer service is 20 minutes, and as long as 120 minutes to speak to a representative in Spanish
- Most companies require a social security number to get connected (which many families do not have or feel comfortable sharing), or require a substantial deposit in lieu of a social security number
- "Free trials" require signing up for contracts that require fees after the free trial is complete, or paying significant up-front deposits

Our findings for each internet company can be found in the table below, and in more detail [here](#).

Company	What They Promoted	What We Found
AT&T	60-day free internet access to qualifying limited income households; for continuing households the rate is \$10/month.	Most callers were told that no free trial is available. For the few who were offered a free trial, they had to sign on for a \$59.99/month offer after the 60 days. Low-income families are being offered a \$10/month plan for 5-10 Mbps, with no free trial available. If customers cannot provide a social security number, a \$99 deposit is required.
Charter Spectrum	Free Spectrum broadband and WiFi access for 60 days to households with students who do not already have a Spectrum broadband subscription.	No home internet service in most of Watts 90002 zip code. For customers where Spectrum service is offered, free trial requires them to sign on for a \$54.99/month offer after the 60 days. Existing customers cannot downgrade their services.
Comcast	60 days free for new customers (Internet Essentials package).	No home internet service available for Watts 90002 zip code. Automated system refers you to website internetessentials.com to apply.
Google	Setting up 100,000 WiFi access points for a minimum of 3 months. Donating 4,000 Chromebooks to students across California.	Few details provided on locations for WiFi access points, but focus seems to be on rural areas in California. We found no evidence of any Google-provided WiFi access or devices for students in Watts or anywhere else in Los Angeles.
T-Mobile	Offering 20GB hotspot data for existing customers for the next 60 days.	No home internet service offered. For hotspot offers, they charge an additional \$15 for 2GB to existing customers.
Verizon	Partnering with LAUSD to provide internet access via personal hotspots for all students who lack internet access.	No home internet service for Watts 90002 zip code. Callers who asked about the LAUSD hotspot devices were told by Verizon representatives to contact LAUSD or the child's school to submit a request. For families who did not ask about the offer, Verizon representatives did not mention it and instead suggested families go to a public hotspot.

Hotspot Distribution

Given the limitations of available offerings from internet providers in Watts and other low-income neighborhoods, the success of LA Unified's planned hotspot distribution (in partnership with Verizon) is vital. LA Unified has asked families to request hotspots through their school, and asked schools to request the number of hotspots they need. Based on the experience of schools in our network, we know that distribution is ongoing and making progress. What is clear is that the need is urgent and great. From our network of schools serving 13,500 students, 2,978 hotspots (22% of total student population) have been requested by schools as of April 13, 2020.

Neighborhood	Estimate of hotspots needed
Watts - 8 Partnership Schools	1,647 (36% of students)
South LA - 4 Partnership Schools	758 (22% of students)
Boyle Heights - 6 Partnership Schools	582 (11% of students)
Total	2,978 (22% of students)

Recommendations

As efforts to expand internet access and support distance learning continue, we urge state, district and technology leaders to put equity at the forefront. For the sake of our students and their futures, we must:

- **Hold technology companies accountable for ensuring that public relations announcements match up with actual services**
 - Develop and vet implementation plans for services before sharing promotional offers made by technology companies
 - Ensure accountability for delivering accessible services to communities where the need is greatest
 - Ensure there are at least two internet providers for every community
- **Prioritize access for the communities with the greatest unmet need first**
 - Ensure internet companies offer viable services to underserved communities like Watts, South LA and Boyle Heights
 - Distribute hotspots to most underserved communities first
 - Invest in new and ongoing public wireless access points in most underserved communities, particularly in and around high-need schools and public housing developments
 - Make sure that long-term infrastructure investments in high-need communities happen
- **Support schools' technology and safety needs**
 - Support school staff safety in the distribution of technology, providing additional staffing, supplies and alternatives to in-person distribution (e.g. mailing hotspots directly to families)
 - Ensure schools have the technology they need beyond the COVID-19 crisis, so current investments can turn in to long-term resources
- **Simplify processes for families to access internet offers**
 - Target outreach to families of students facing the greatest barriers to ensure all can access the internet and distance learning
 - Clearly distinguish free, short-term COVID-19 offers from those which require ongoing contracts
 - Do not require families to provide sensitive identifying information, such as Social Security Numbers
 - Make customer service and technical assistance easily accessible to families who speak languages besides English and who do not have experience setting up home internet
- **Make federal funds available for equipping students with home internet access**
 - The Federal Communications Commission should allow its beneficiaries to utilize universal service funding to provide home wireless service for students who lack internet access at home
 - Funds are needed for both short-term connectivity and for long-term infrastructure improvements

As plans move forward to connect students and families for distance learning, we urge leaders to prioritize access for the communities with the greatest unmet need first and to remove every barrier possible to students' continued learning. As we deal with the reality that school will be administered from a distance for the foreseeable future, we must ensure that the basic tools for instruction and learning are there for the students most at risk of falling behind.

ⁱ USC Annenberg Connected Cities and Inclusive Growth (CCIG) Policy Brief # 5, "[COVID-19 and the Distance Learning Gap](#)," April 2020.

ⁱⁱ Education Trust-West, "[California Parent Poll: COVID-19 and School Closures](#)", April 2020.