

The Digital Divide During COVID

Boulder Valley School District

Boulder, CO



On March 12th, students in Boulder Valley School District (BVSD) were asked to honor the COVID-19 stay at home mandate, and on March 13th, BVSD's IT and Equity and Partnerships Teams jumped into action. It was no secret that hundreds of families in BVSD not only lacked access to technology, but equally crucial, lacked access to the internet. The urgency of connecting families to technology was never so pressing.

The Chief Intelligence Officer used his creativity, leadership, and leveraged his network of community allies to embark on a project unprecedented in the district. Together with a dedicated team of passionate principals, community liaisons, and support staff, BVSD succeeded in connecting close to 1,000 families to the internet and distributed more than 6,000 Chromebook devices to students throughout the district.

Boulder's IT Team collaborated with the Boulder Public Library, who donated 100 hotspots, enabling students to establish an immediate internet connection. Staff network organized a thorough distribution plan through a combination of addressing phone calls to the IT help line, making personal phone calls to families, and responding to teacher feedback about who was not yet attending virtual classes.

In addition to the family outreach effort, IT deepened its partnership with the wireless technology company LiveWire. Boulder was able to strike a win/win situation with the company, allowing it to mount signal antennas on a variety of schools in the district in exchange for free internet to free/reduced lunch qualified families, encompassing 21% of BVSD's population. Those families who were within reach of the internet signal set up appointments directly with LiveWire and are now able to access the internet, some for the first time ever. This means that students could then participate in Home Learning, and parents could embark on a journey of learning about technology and digital literacy. BVSD revealed one silver lining under the dire COVID circumstances as the district made more headway in narrowing the digital divide in 3 months than it did in the last decade. Staff also acknowledge there is still work to be done.

BVSD also partnered with Comcast to implement and finance the Internet Essentials program and is covering the cost of the first six months' subscription for the families of students receiving free and reduced lunch.

In response to parent challenges of managing various learning platforms, BVSD fielded personal phone calls, went to people's houses to help troubleshoot access issues, and is currently working on creating "how to videos" in Spanish and English for families who are less familiar with technology. Those videos range from "How to login to your Single Sign-On account," to "How to access assignments in Schoology," to "How to login to Infinite Campus."

BVSD also partnered with CU's Renee Crown Institute who sent out surveys to Spanish speaking families. The 120+ responses helped inform teachers and administrators about the successes and challenges families faced and continue to face, both from a personal and an educational/technology standpoint. As a result, the district has been able to provide additional services such as a) a food distribution program, b) childcare for essential workers, c) online Summer Learning support, and d) personal phone calls home.