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A California program spent millions on devices for distance learning. Here's where it went

Despite push, hundreds of thousands of students still don't have computers at home

By [EdSource](#)

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For the first time ever, the vast majority of California families say their kids have personal computing devices that they can use for school. But even after a year of distance learning, thousands of students still don't have a computer or access to the internet at home.

After schools had to close their buildings last spring due to Covid-19, most pivoted online, forcing districts and state officials to rapidly shore up resources for extra computers and Wi-Fi hot spots for students who didn't have their own devices or internet access at home.

Following an outcry from districts, the Californians Dedicated to Education Foundation, a private nonprofit fiscal manager for the California Department of Education, launched the Bridging the Digital Divide Fund to raise money to buy technology. The fund prioritized small, rural districts with high numbers of low-income students.

COVID Q&A: When do Californians still need to wear a mask and what will change on June 15?

Overall, the devices went to rural districts, as well as some larger districts serving high numbers of low-income students, according to an EdSource analysis of data from the California Department of Education. About 69% of the districts that received devices are in rural areas and predominantly serve low-income families. Nearly half of all devices went to those districts, and the remaining went to larger suburban and urban districts with high portions of low-income students. Many of the districts with high

percentages of low-income students also have high percentages of English learners, another student group the program targeted.

The Bridging the Digital Divide Fund was one of the few avenues through which the California Department of Education provided tangible devices to districts when schools closed, though several other simultaneous efforts took place to provide students with technology. In the midst of a global shortage of laptops, the program funded and distributed 45,884 Chromebooks, 1,103 Google management licenses, 70 wireless mice, 15 printers and four \$500 drawing tablets, according to data provided to EdSource.

Despite efforts to appeal to Silicon Valley's big donors, however, hundreds of thousands of students are still estimated to be without computers at home, according to recent data from the California Emerging Technology Fund and the University of Southern California, which conducted a statewide survey of 575 California families in February and March.

As of March, 95% of California families with school-age children said each of their kids had a device to use for remote classes, according to the USC and technology fund study. About 3% said a computer was available but shared, and 2% said they didn't have a device. Most of those without a device are Spanish-speaking families, the study found.

Other estimates, however, suggest an even greater portion of students are still without devices after more than a year of distance learning. Using data from the Census Household Pulse Survey from April 2020 to March 2021, the Public Policy Institute of California found that only about 80% of California students have access to computer devices in spring 2021, up from 67% when schools first closed in March 2020.

Several of the state's largest urban districts found support from tech giants in their backyards, such as Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey's \$10 million technology gift to Oakland Unified. Los Angeles Unified set up its own low-cost program with Verizon to provide internet service to students' homes and, more recently, the district passed a motion to continue to fund and monitor computer and internet access for students beyond the pandemic.

Today, nearly 85% of California residents use a computer, laptop or tablet to access the internet from home, up from 78% in 2019, according to the USC survey. The share of residents who can only connect to the internet on a smartphone dropped from 10% in 2019 to 6% in 2021.

The authors of the report directly attribute that increased computer access to the role schools and programs such as the digital divide fund played this past year in getting devices to the students who needed them most.

"We see a very significant impact of the provision of computers and tablets from school districts. About 75% of parents said their kid has a tablet or computer provided by the districts, most said after the pandemic started," said Hernan Galperin, principal researcher for the study.

Inequities in technology existed long before Covid-19. So when computers become the doors to the classroom during the pandemic, district and state officials had to act quickly to find solutions.

Using findings from a survey by the Small School Districts Association last summer that gauged districts' device needs, the California Department of Education and its nonprofit partner worked with Office Depot to order and distribute the devices in bulk to 214 districts and 47 charter schools, about one-fourth of all California school districts, according to data provided to EdSource.

"These donations were the first pieces of the puzzle to getting our students connected and able to learn from home," said Mary Nicely, senior policy adviser to State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond, who has been steering the department's efforts to close the digital divide this year.

"No one is calling us saying they need devices. It's connectivity, that is the big issue," Nicely said, referring to the even greater need for affordable high-speed internet service across California.

Acknowledging that many students still don't have devices or connectivity, she added, "Schools shut down, so it was hard to figure out how to get to students. I think we did the best we could with what we had."