

OP-ED

Andrew: What would you give up for a reliable internet connection?

 by **Special to San José Spotlight**

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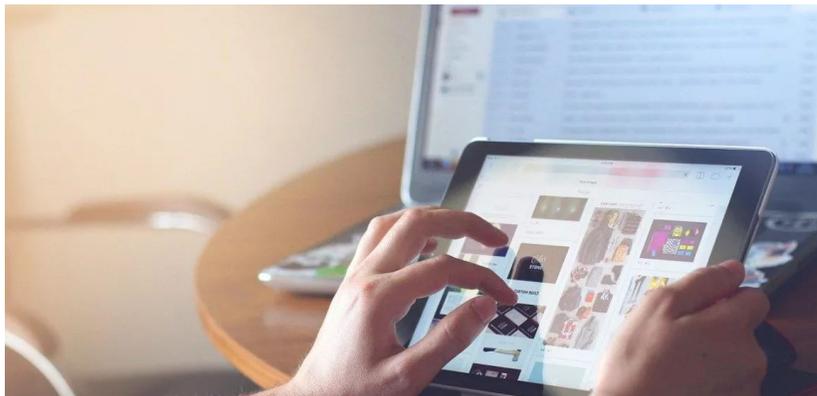


Photo courtesy of Pixabay.



tough decision and one that 2.1 million Californians have to make each day.

Yes, even here in Silicon Valley, where the internet is said to be invented, thousands of students do not have a reliable internet connection at home. How do we know? Stop into a Starbucks, Jack-in-the-Box or McDonalds and look around. Don't forget to scan the cars in the parking lot of Target or Walmart where you will see parents sitting patiently while their child attends class online or completes a homework assignment. Better yet, the parent and child may be checking the "parent portal" of their school district to locate pertinent information, check grades or apply for college.

In 2015, the East Side Union High School District in partnership with San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo announced one of the nation's first efforts at creating a district-wide network that reaches the homes of students and families by free wireless internet access in some of the city's least connected neighborhoods.



partnership that aims to close the digital divide in San Jose.

At a press conference in 2020, Liccardo asserted, “We need to begin recognizing connectivity like any other utility—electricity or water—that has become essential to survive in our modern world.”

While the 2020 pandemic brought laptops, hot spots and low cost connectivity plans to the homes of students, these were just short term solutions. And, given that school districts were the main “broker” of device disbursement and connectivity procurement for under-resourced families, a long term solution is needed. We need to ensure educators spend their time educating, not ensuring students have a reliable internet connection.

When students are back to full-time in-person instruction, the “demand” that school districts provide laptops, hotspots and low cost connectivity plans will disappear. The “haves” will continue to have access in all forms and the “have nots” will lose whatever access they obtained due to mandatory at-home learning. The digital divide will not only be maintained... it will be exasperated.

In simplest terms, the digital divide is the gulf between those who have ready access to computers

Sunne Wright McPeak, president and chief executive officer of the California Emerging Technology Fund, contends, “The digital divide perpetuates differences in student performance between high performing schools and low performing schools. Over time, these imbalances can translate into a widening chasm that keeps low-income youth, students with disabilities, immigrant youth and youth of color disconnected from the skills and resources they need to better their circumstances.”

Congresswoman Anna Eshoo, co-author of the Community Broadband Act legislation, attests that, “Fast and affordable internet is a matter of life and death. Today, tens of millions of Americans completely lack high-speed internet.”

To realize a vision of every student becoming a productive, economically mobile adult, access to broadband and understanding how to use technology is essential. The best strategy for combating the digital divide is digital inclusion.

The National Digital Inclusion Alliance recommends 1) affordable, robust broadband internet service; 2) internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user; 3) access to digital literacy training; 4) quality technical support; and 5) applications and

At a recent press conference, Supervisor Cindy Chavez stated, “We still need to address Santa Clara County’s existing structural inequities in internet access. This is why I am advocating for the creation of a digital divide consortium.” Chavez also sees the consortium as a vehicle for applying for millions of dollars to put toward these efforts.

To inspire students to college and careers requires quality high-speed Internet infrastructure, connectivity programs for low income families, computing devices, educational technology integration and basic digital literacy skills for all in a household.

Corporations, foundations, entrepreneurs and governmental agencies should lead the way in both financial support and advocacy for permanent solutions described for digital inclusion.

Each of us should: 1) Support HR 1631, Community Broadband Act, by contacting your United States representative and AB 34 Broadband for All Act of 2022 by contacting your state Assemblymember; 2) Demand that internet companies uphold their commitment to provide quality internet connections to needy families by sending emails and letters to their corporate offices; 3) Donate and volunteer at nonprofit agencies



the digital divide by assisting them in navigating low cost offers, device procurement and locating digital literacy classes.

Lisa Andrew is the president and CEO of the Silicon Valley Education Foundation.

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