EDUCATION

With the struggles of remote learning, why educators say 'it's impossible to separate' academics from digital access

Meghan Mangrum Nashville Tennessean

Published 10:00 p.m. CT Aug. 20, 2020 | **Updated 11:14 a.m. CT Aug. 21, 2020**

Editor's note: This story has been updated to correct information about district issued laptops.

On one hand, Malik Gordon is lucky. His mother, Victoria Gordon, stopped working several years ago to support what she calls her son's "educational journey." She is able to be home during the day while Malik traverses virtual learning this fall.

On the other hand, Gordon struggles to help her son with his math work.

Luckily, when he and his cousins combine their two hot spots, their internet connections all get stronger. On the other hand, sometimes Malik's laptop suddenly crashes, or they can't download needed software.

Malik, a sixth grader at Nashville Classical Charter School, faces some of the same challenges as thousands of students who are learning remotely this fall because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Many students lack access to computers or the internet. Their home life might be distracting or not suitable for learning. Their parents might not be able to help with their schoolwork or don't encourage their children to take remote learning seriously.

And experts worry that as school districts make it up as they go along with limited resources, the achievement gaps between the students who have access and those who don't — and between the students who were already successful and those who weren't — will only widen.

Bridging the digital divide

More than 12 million students across the country cannot finish schoolwork each year because they lack internet, according to a report by the Tennessee Chamber of Commerce and Industry — and that was before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nearly 1 in 4 Black and Hispanic students don't have access to broadband internet, and at least 492,000 Tennesseans don't have wired internet access capable of 25 Mbps download speeds, a minimum requirement for most online learning, according to the report.

"It's really impossible to separate the technology issues from the academic issues" in today's virtual learning environment, said Mason Bellamy, Metro Nashville Public Schools' new chief of academics and schools.

But before addressing academic issues, schools must first grapple with infrastructure, educators say. And that doesn't just mean getting devices in the hands of students and making sure they can get online.

Jared Bigham, senior adviser on workforce and rural initiatives for the Tennessee Chamber of Commerce, argues that for students to even have a chance at success three things must exist: broadband access for every family across Tennessee, adequate technology or equipment for students to learn at home and appropriate professional development for educators on how to successfully facilitate virtual and/or blended instruction.

"I think this digital divide that we are experiencing because of the pandemic is really putting the issue of inequity to the forefront," Bigham said. "In education we already had several inequities in how we educate our children, especially in low socio-economic areas, and now the divides and inequities are getting even larger."

Schools can't focus on teaching parents and teachers how to use technology or focus on improving student engagement and achievement through virtual learning until all students have access, Bigham added.

"We have to get to the point where high-speed access is just like any other utility that we have in households, like electricity and water," he said. "That's when we know that we have bridged the gap."

In Nashville, Metro Schools distributed more than 40,000 laptops and devices before students began the school year learning from home Aug. 4.

Metro Schools has nearly 17,000 mobile internet hot spots at its disposal and has deployed more than 10,000 to families. Thanks to $26 million in federal CARES Act funding from the city, the district will eventually be a 1-to-1 district as shipments of brand-new laptops arrive through the fall for about 70,000 students.

On the first day of school, though, most students using district-issued laptops were unable to log in to their classes. Many families still have issues with the computers crashing or just navigating different platforms daily.

Director of Schools Adrienne Battle recently said most widespread tech issues have been resolved and that staff are on call daily to help troubleshoot problems students might be having.

But even once students get online, virtual learning still has its challenges.

The challenges of virtual learning

The challenges students face at home also aren't new, Bellamy told The Tennessean on Wednesday. When students are late to class it might be because the power went out, the internet stopped working or Microsoft Teams crashed, compared to when schools are in person and the car broke down or a locker wouldn't open, he said.

"Let's not separate this from what we typically struggle with when students are in the school building," Bellamy said. "These are some of the same challenges. ... We have to teach children to be resilient, and this is another way to do that."

Bellamy argues some of the common concerns about virtual learning, such as students who are stuck at home with little support versus students whose parents pay private tutors or organize learning pods for their children, are just new manifestations of common problems.

Those same students don't have help with homework after school, he said.

And when it comes to teachers, Bellamy, like many district administrators trying to look on the bright side this fall, said "good teaching is good teaching."

"The good news is that good teaching in brick-and-mortar settings is good teaching in the virtual settings," he said.

But experts argue even good teachers will struggle in virtual environments without the proper support.

"To do digital learning well, there has to be active engagement from the instructor," said Carolyn Heinrich, a professor and department chair at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College. "It's not just about device capabilities."

Staff must be well trained, and there should be peer-to-peer learning for teachers, too, she said.

Heinrich and her colleagues spent years studying digital learning in Dallas and Milwaukee public schools. Some of their takeaways reflect problems districts might now face as remote learning expands across the country.

Some of the challenges come from the content or platforms that districts use, such as the Florida Virtual School curriculum that Metro Schools and Knox County Schools have approved or platforms like Schoology or Clever.

"They are made with the average student in mind, too, and your classroom might not look like that average level," Heinrich said.

If a student is expected to watch a video independently, gain knowledge and complete work based on that asynchronous learning, but the content is geared toward a student on grade level and this child isn't, that poses a problem, Heinrich said.

Gordon has seen that in her own home. As a middle schooler, Malik is expected to type up essays and answers and submit them in Microsoft Word, but he's never been taught to type.

Gordon admits she has been having Malik write down his answers and she, a former medical transcriptionist, types them up for him. She also notices that her niece, a ninth grader, is struggling with content in math because she doesn't read on grade level and has trouble reading instructions or dissecting math word problems.

"I am computer literate and it's been challenging for me, so I can only imagine how some families are doing," Gordon said. "Is he able to learn when other kids (aren't) able to learn? Yes. But is my child still behind? Yes. Is his mom still pushing the issue? Yes. Am I getting kind of tired? Yes."

Therefore, it's important for districts to support teachers and help them find ways to use the content appropriately for their students or even individualize activities, Heinrich said.

"Districts really need to understand where the teachers are and their level of preparation, knowledge and engagement," she said. "You might have some who are experts and have taught with technology before and others who have a lot of anxiety about doing it."

Successful virtual learning includes selecting master teachers who can help other teachers overcome basic technology problems and peer-to-peer mentoring so that teachers can hone their actual craft and adapt it for a virtual environment, Heinrich argues.

This is 'nothing new'

Gini Pupo-Walker, state director for Tennessee for The Education Trust and a member of the Metro Nashville Board of Education, called the shift to online learning for an entire district a "massive undertaking."

"And some people are running with it, and other people are just struggling to switch what they are doing," she said.

Pupo-Walker worries the district has had to split energy and support between teachers who are struggling and helping families at home.

Like many school districts, Metro Schools had to revamp and restructure its IT support teams, and still doesn't have enough IT support to go around.

She hates that families might be sitting on hold for long periods of time, like they did when all district-issued laptops had the same connection issue on the first day of school.

She also worries that with more flexibility within their schedules, the district might lose students who should be at home learning, such as high school students who decide to go to work instead or English language learners who give up because of the language barriers.

"I'm worried that kids who don't have a meaningful connection with their teachers, with their school, that we'll lose them," she said. "I think we're going to see a ton of what we know already are divides in student progress on a whole range of issues, not just academic. There will be children at home who will absolutely accelerate and they will return (with) a greater sort of continuum of skills ... and there will be others who fall further behind."

Sonya Thomas, executive director of Nashville PROPEL — a coalition of parents and grandparents of Metro Nashville students — said these challenges and potential divides are nothing new.

"In our community, in the Black and brown community, the digital divide became very real. We've been saying we don't have stuff, that there's a lack of equity — but COVID-19, it amplified that," Thomas said during a webinar featuring Nashville PROPEL leaders and the Diverse Learners Cooperative on Wednesday.

For Thomas, an obvious solution for parents while school schedules and modes of instruction are in flux this fall is to implement individual learning plans for all students, separate from the individualized education programs (IEPs) that exceptional education students participate in.

Nashville PROPEL, of which Gordon is also a member, launched a "Parent Manifesto" that calls for every child to have access to a district-issued device with the appropriate software and for the individual learning plan for academic recovery to be completed by Nov. 1 and communicated with parents.

Parents expect and deserve high-quality instruction for their children no matter where learning takes place, the group argues.

But some think small-scale solutions, like virtual learning plans or handing out hot spots, are just a Band-Aid.

Possible solutions

Pupo-Walker and Bigham argue school districts need help truly tackling the digital divide and increasing the support teachers and students receive when they are learning from home.

Large internet providers have stepped in to offer free or low-cost internet services, such as Comcast's new Internet Essentials Partnership Program, which offers 60 days of free internet, followed by reduced priced plans to K-12 students.

The Tennessee College Access and Success Network recently partnered with the United Way of Greater Nashville and the Nashville Public Library to expand internet technology at five branch libraries: Edmondson Pike, Looby, Pruitt, Bellevue and Hermitage. Families can access the enhanced Wi-Fi from the library's parking lot.

But these are short-term solutions, they argue.

"This pandemic has really brought to light the severe inequities when it comes to digital access," Pupo-Walker said. "The district giving out tens of thousands of hot spots is a great short-term solution and is one within our control to do, but it's not a solution. It's not a solution by any stretch."

"I think we have to have a new deal kind of approach where we create infrastructure for online access," Pupo-Walker said.

Pupo-Walker calls for state leadership, federal assistance and private sector support.

One example she and Bigham point to is the new public-private partnership in Chattanooga between Hamilton County Schools and EPB Chattanooga, the city's electric utility that also provides gigabit internet service.

Through the new HCS EdConnect initiative, families of Hamilton County Schools students who qualify for federal free or reduced lunch will be eligible to receive an EPB high-speed internet connection at home along with a Wi-Fi router for free.

Multiple private organizations, nonprofits and coalitions are helping to fund the $8.2 million needed for the infrastructure for the project.

In Metro Nashville, the Nashville Public Education Foundation, along with AllianceBernstein and Google Fiber, has raised $100,000 to purchase charging cables, individual hot spots and additional devices for Metro students as well as invest in long-term solutions starting with investing in a citywide technology disparity survey organized by the Digital Inclusion and Access Taskforce, according to a news release.

Federal, state leadership needed

Meanwhile, Pupo-Walker is calling for Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee and Education Commissioner Penny Schwinn to push for more stimulus funding specifically for technology from the federal government — and quickly.

"I think Lee and Penny Schwinn have access right now to the (Trump) administration ... and I'd urge them to absolutely push Congress to come up with a stimulus plan sooner than later, one that has prioritized digital access. We need them to be absolutely pushing the Senate and the White House to move quickly on this," she said.

As for Bigham, he notes that for the thousands of students in rural Tennessee who struggle with internet access, the state will have to provide incentives to companies to expand broadband access in those areas.

Bigham anticipates most Tennessee schools will either partially or fully move online before the end of the semester as schools have already reported dozens of confirmed COVID-19 cases within just a few weeks of reopening.

And if those districts haven't figured out how students can access quality instruction, it will only widen the divide between high-achieving students and those who struggle.

"It's going to amplify the deficiencies that those students were already struggling with," he said. "It's sad to think we are going to have a gap, not only in the state, but in this nation in student learning."

Want to read more stories like this? A subscription to one of our Tennessee publications gets you unlimited access to all the latest news and the ability to tap into stories, photos and videos from throughout the USA TODAY Network's 261 daily sites.

Meghan Mangrum covers education in Nashville for the USA TODAY Network - Tennessee. Contact her at mmangrum@tennessean.com. Follow her on Twitter @memangrum.