

# 5 lessons learned about the digital divide from the COVID-19 pandemic

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By: [Dean Cantu](#) | July 28, 2021



Even before the COVID 19 pandemic K-12 schools were faced with the challenge of providing Internet access to underserved communities and were engaged in the process of developing effective strategies to integrate technology into the teaching and learning process.

The pandemic, however, put a spotlight on the shortcomings of these efforts and the digital divide that still persisted. It also served to indelibly change the way we view and approach technology integration and online or remote learning going forward. If we take away any lessons from the pandemic, it's that technology can facilitate best practices in pedagogy, community building, and professional development.

## Phase I: Spring 2020

In spring 2020 when schools initially transitioned to online or remote learning, many administrators and teachers thought it would be temporary. As the news reports of infections and deaths kept coming, schools had to adjust and pivot

yet again to an online or remote learning format for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year.

That first phase was born out of necessity, and therefore lacked the structure and organization of other K-12 initiatives that are almost always preceded by extensive research, planning, and preparation. Schools had to pivot almost overnight to online instructional delivery; and students had to adjust to remote learning. School districts had to figure out how to provide Internet access and technology to all students, including those in underserved neighborhoods.

The first task was ensuring high-speed Internet access for all students. School districts expanded efforts that had been launched prior to the pandemic, to address the digital divide. For many school districts, this included partnering with the business community to improve connectivity and setting up Internet hotspots in neighborhoods where access was unreliable or nonexistent. Other creative solutions included repurposing school buses with Wi-Fi routers and strategically placing these moveable hotspots in underserved neighborhoods.

At the same time, teacher professional development was another high priority. For many teachers, this required additional professional development in order to effectively deliver instruction in an online teaching and learning environment; adding new teaching strategies and approaches to their pedagogical repertoire.

## **Phase II: Summer 2020**

School administrators knew they had to make good use of summer to prepare for the fall. Professional development for teachers focused on preparing lessons and delivering instruction using a variety of education modalities to include online (synchronous), online (asynchronous), blended/hybrid, and face-to-face.

Before the pandemic, schools and teachers were engaged in all of these instructional modalities, although the pedagogical scales still tipped to the face-to-face side. In many situations, teachers were incorporating these instructional modalities outside of the school day, for example, integrating flipped classroom strategies. These initiatives highlighted the need for state-of-the-art technology and high-speed Internet access across each district; and the pandemic was the impetus that schools and cities needed to expedite efforts to provide these essential learning components to all of their students.

## **COVID-19: 18 months later and still learning**

The lessons that we learned over the course of the past year and a half will continue to inform pedagogy going forward. Indeed, while some believe we

will be returning to “normal” this upcoming 2021-22 school year, the truth is there will be a “new normal.” Across the nation, teachers and administrators have learned how technology integration and instructional modalities such as hybrid/blended and online instruction, can augment traditional face-to-face teaching and learning. The pivot K-12 education experienced during the pandemic also resulted in the following takeaways:

1. Internet access for all students provides an opportunity to learn outside of the school day. Creative solutions such as mobile hotspots and coordinating with local businesses to put Wi-Fi routers in place will help bridge the digital divide.
2. Teachers may have been thrust outside of their comfort zone initially, but they embraced the challenge and developed engaging and creative activities that enhanced the learning process, both in an online and in-person classroom environment.
3. Professional development can be delivered in an efficacious manner both online and in-person.
4. Technology can serve as an effective conduit to further build the connection between schools and the community.
5. A final takeaway is that all of this will require government funding, as well as support from the business community. The digital divide that existed before the pandemic will only become wider if we do not invest in high-speed, WiFi, which has to be maintained and upgraded throughout its lifespan.

Make no mistake: all of these initiatives were in various stages of development. The pandemic, however, expedited their implementation and compressed the timeline for adoption. It is now our responsibility to make sure that the lessons we learned from the COVID-19 pandemic will allow us to fulfill our promise of achieving digital equity, which has eluded K-12 education since the inception of the Internet.

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