



Reducing Rural Inequities and Houseless Student Education Gap through Broadband Expansion

June 23, 2020

Dear Co-Chair Kotek, Co-Chair Courtney, Co-Vice Chair Girod, Co-Vice Chair Drazan and Members of the Joint Interim Committee On The First Special Session of 2020,

My name is Michael DeSantis, and I serve as a Public Policy Associate at Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. EMO is an association comprising of 15 denominations and over 150 congregations, organizations, and interfaith partners, connecting hundreds of thousands of diverse members of the faith community all across the state. We work to improve the lives of Oregonians through housing and other direct service programs, dialogue and advocacy.

EMO supports proposed legislative concept to expands access to broadband via a service charge on cell phone plans. EMO's support for expanding access to broadband stems from both our statewide membership and our commitment to ensuring the wellbeing of all Oregonians, especially the marginalized, oppressed, and disenfranchised. We urge the Legislature to fund broadband expansion because our current network leaves inequities in Oregonians' access to remote services. Expanding broadband access will also support rural Oregon businesses, preserving the life-sustaining jobs of thousands of Oregonians, including many who are low-income, migrants, and people of color.

Disproportionate rates of Oregonians in rural areas, low-income families, and communities of color are unable to access the internet. According to the Federal Communications Commission's 2020 Broadband Deployment Report, 22.3 percent of Americans in rural areas and 27.3 percent of those on Tribal lands lack access to high-speed internet, compared to only 1.5% in urban areas.¹ Rates of household internet access also decrease with household income and skew heavily by race: 24% of Black Americans do not have home internet access, compared to 16.5% for whites, and are 58% more likely to not have internet because they cannot afford it.²

EMO especially supports broadband expansion as a way to support the education of houseless youth in the distance learning model necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As leading advocates for Oregon's unaccompanied houseless youth (UHY), EMO is all too familiar with the barriers houseless youth face to accessing education. Oregon's houseless student high school graduation rate is just 60%, the lowest among all cohort demographics tracked by the Department of Education.³

With Oregon K-12 schools transitioning to a distance learning model to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, houseless youth now face new obstacles to fulfilling their academic potential. In fact, many houseless Oregon K-12 students primarily access the internet while at school under normal circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic also limits houseless students' access to other common internet hubs, such as public libraries. The student internet access gap is especially prominent in rural communities, where youth experience houselessness at the same rate as youth in cities but where there are also few shelters and other UHY services.⁴

On behalf of our clients and in embrace of our responsibility for one another during this global health crisis, we thank the Legislature for considering these requests.

Sincerely,

Michael DeSantis
Public Policy Associate
Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon

¹ <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-20-50A1.pdf>

² https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_702.40.asp

³ <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/reports-and-data/students/Documents/CohortSummaryPages2018-19.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/youth-homelessness-rural-america/>

Oregon students most likely to disengage from school: By the numbers

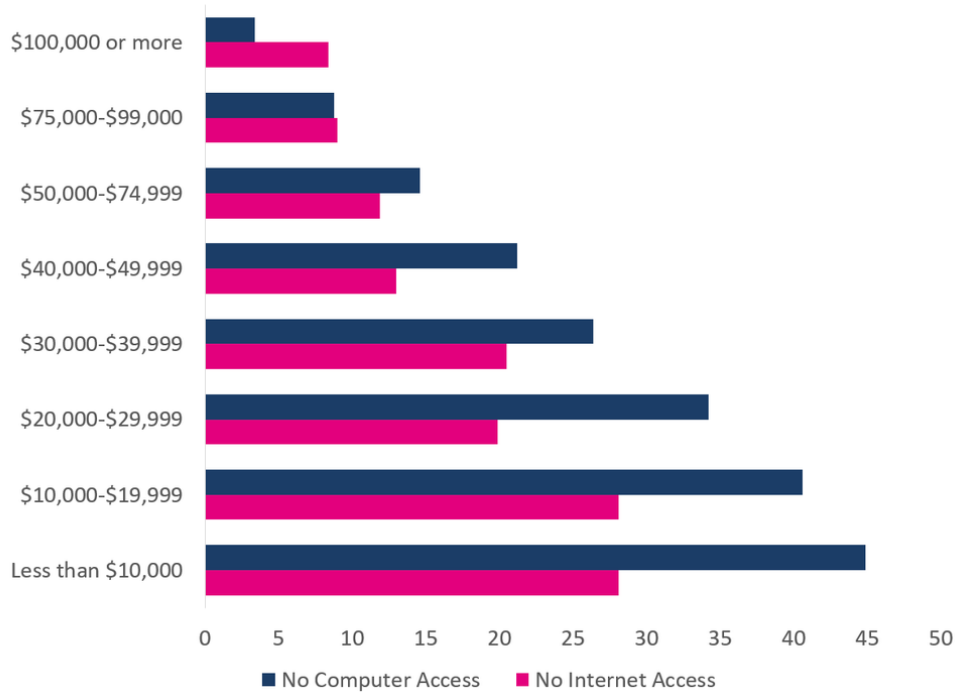
Shown is the percentage of students who ended four years of high school without a diploma

> Homeless students*	40%
> Students in Coos County	37%
> Oregon Connections Academy students*	36%
> Special education students*	33%
> Native American students	32%
> Students in Douglas County	32%
> Black students	30%
> Low-income students	26%
> Males	23%

*Rate after five years in high school; Connections Academy is a large online charter sch

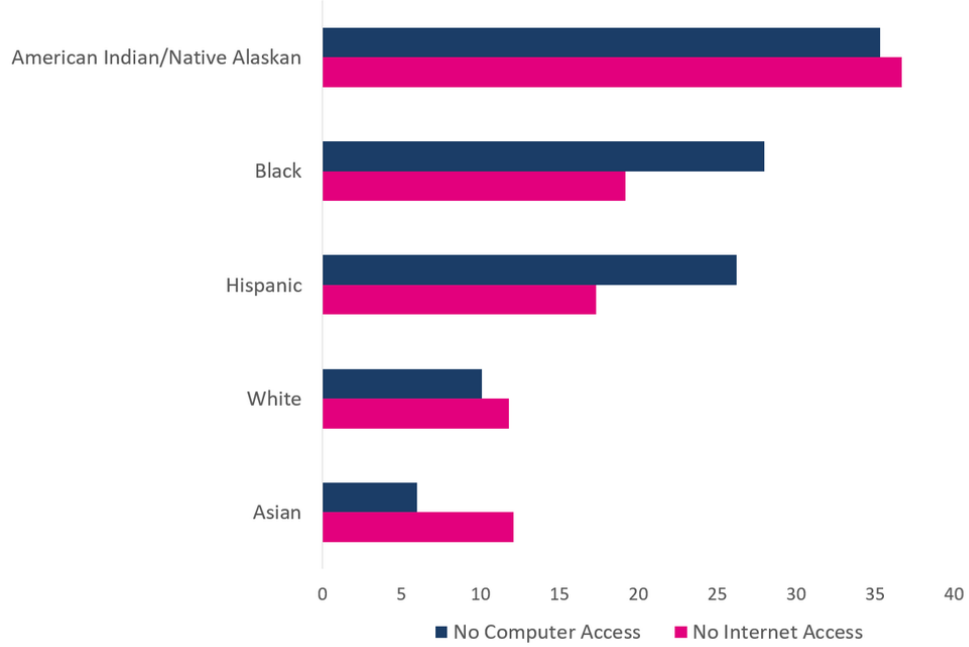
Source: Analysis by The Oregonian/Oregon of Oregon Department of Education data

Percent of students in households with no internet or computer access by income, national



USA Facts. <https://usafacts.org/articles/internet-access-students-at-home/>.

Percent of students in households with no internet or computer access by race, national



USA Facts. <https://usafacts.org/articles/internet-access-students-at-home/>.