

To: Chair Teresa Alonso Leon and Members of the Oregon House Committee on Education

From:

Stuart Long, CIO, Northwest Regional ESD and Cascade Technology Alliance

Rachel Wente-Chaney, CIO, High Desert Education Service District

Date: 22. September 2020

Re: High-Speed Internet Access for Oregon Students and Families

As chief information officers of education service districts, we have spent the past six months refining our understanding of the gaps in high-speed internet access for families in our communities. Those gaps are impacted by:

1. **Equity** “While 92% of white households with children in the Portland area have broadband internet, just 77% of nonwhite, non-Hispanic households with children do.”¹
2. **Geography** Oregon has significant areas outside of the Portland area with no high-speed internet service providers.
3. **Family Income** Low-income families in our state struggle to afford high-speed internet access, even with federal cost-offset programs like Lifeline and provider programs like Comcast’s Internet Essentials. Public education mitigates that when students are in school, via annual investments in our networks. However, a widening *digital divide* emerged the past decade, as children return home each day unable to access digital learning after hours.
4. **COVID-19 Impact** In times of school-building closures, that *digital divide* becomes a gulf. In 2018, 72.3% of Oregonians indicated they have high-speed internet at home.² With parents and students at home together this year, all needing video conferencing, even connected families need more. And with 27.7% underserved, it means—if we translate that to a rough estimate—that more than 150,000 of Oregon’s 582,661 K-12 students lack access to any high speed internet.

We saw each of these impacts up close the past six months in our work connecting families to ISPs for service, buying hotspots by the thousands—made easier by the work of the Oregon Department of Education on a purchasing partnership with Verizon Wireless for this school year—and, innovating through a pandemic to ensure access for students and teachers. Despite this, gaps still exist. As individual school districts, we cannot finance a significant, equity-focused improvement in high-speed internet for our students and families on our own. ***We are eager for investment-minded conversations and partnerships on broadband access at the state level. It benefits all Oregonians.***

¹ *Oregon Insight: Broadband access essential to working from home during pandemic. The Oregonian, 2020. July 28.*

<https://www.oregonlive.com/business/2020/07/oregon-insight-broadband-access-essential-to-working-from-home-during-pandemic-a-potential-opportunity-afterwards.html>

² *Working from Home, and Broadband Access in Oregon*, Oregon Office of Economic Analysis: Josh Lehner, July 2020.

<https://oregoneconomicanalysis.files.wordpress.com/2020/07/working-from-home-july-2020.pdf>