

From: Amanda Dickey
To: [CA Broadband Council](#)
Subject: Santa Clara COE- Public Comments
Date: Tuesday, November 17, 2020 10:57:10 PM
Attachments: Letter to Broadband Council.pdf

Members of the Council-

Please find the attached public comments from Dr. Mary Ann Dewan, Santa Clara Superintendent of Schools.

Thanks,

Amanda M. Dickey, Esq.

Director III - Government Relations
Santa Clara County Office of Education

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November 17, 2020

RE: COMMENTS REGARDING THE BROADBAND COUNCIL ACTION PLAN

Dear California Broadband Council Members:

I write on behalf of Santa Clara County's 265,000 students to express our concerns with the adequacy, affordability, and reliability of current internet services. While the COVID-19 pandemic has made internet essential in new ways, the systemic inequities created by the digital divide pre-date the pandemic and will continue long after it is over. California must invest in long-term, statewide solutions to connectivity in recognition that the internet is as essential as electricity and water for health and safety.

Current Connectivity Costs are Unsustainable and Do Nothing to Further Long-Term Solutions

Schools in Santa Clara County have spent more than \$20 million in the last six months to connect students to internet. In total we estimate that California schools have spent \$1 billion on connectivity since the pandemic started.¹ Not only is this expense unsustainable, it has done nothing to increase broadband infrastructure or create long-term solutions that will lessen the cost of, or increase student access to, internet in future years. California policy makers must make a long-term investment in public-operated broadband systems to ensure that internet is affordable and available statewide. While the cost of establishing a public utility is significant, the pandemic has demonstrated that the alternative (i.e. continuing to rely on for-profit companies who often operate as a monopoly) does not further economic efficiency and serves to perpetuate inequities in our systems and structures.

Most Low-Cost Internet Offers are Insufficient and Inaccessible

Although most internet service providers (ISPs) offer connectivity discounts to low-income families, the minimum standards for these plans are significantly below what is required for distance learning. In addition, ISPs generally only extend discounts to families in poverty (\$28,700 for a family of 2; \$39,700 for a family of 4). While some ISPs have temporarily expanded eligibility or increased speeds and data limits, there is little transparency regarding the quality of low-cost offers and whether they are sufficient for participation in distance learning. We support the Broadband Council's proposal to increase transparency of service plans and urge the Council to include actions in their plan that will ensure all internet offers, including low-cost options, meet minimum speeds of 100 mbps, include no less than 1 terabyte of data usage, and are prohibited from limiting through-put (i.e. throttling).

Connectivity is As Much Limited by Affordability As it is by Infrastructure

While many state and federal resources in recent years have been committed to connecting rural areas with no broadband infrastructure, little attention has been paid to urban communities whose access is limited by affordability and ISP monopolies. A survey of connectivity in our county indicates that income is the greatest predictor of connectivity, whether in rural or urban areas.² Though the regions in rural south county are a close second, the greatest concentration of households without connectivity in Santa Clara are in the heart of San Jose, a fact which aligns closely with Census Bureau data indicating that three times as many households in urban areas remain unconnected as in rural areas. Low rates of connectivity should be

¹ Estimate based on Los Angeles Unified School District's cost of \$100 million to connect its 600,000 students which is approximately 10% of California's total student population.

² Survey results can be viewed at <https://www.sccoe.org/covid-19/Pages/Closing-the-Digital-Divide.aspx>



unsurprising given that a mid-tier internet package can easily cost 10% of a low-income family's total take home pay.³ We suggest that the Broadband Council's Action Plan include a proposal to ensure that low-cost internet service plans are progressively structured in a way that is similar to California's other social programs providing essential services.⁴ We also encourage the Council to support changes to policy that would support investments in public-owned and operated broadband in urban areas where only one ISP offers high-speed services.

Unreliable Connectivity is Directly Harming Students' Health, Wellness, and Educational Outcomes

Low speeds, data caps, and limits on through-put (i.e. throttling) are preventing students from participating in live synchronous instruction, accessing health and mental health services, and connecting with community resources such as school meals and free COVID-19 testing. Teachers indicate that many students spend a significant part of instructional time trying to connect and stay connected to the internet. We also know that students without reliable home internet often have to seek out community wifi, thereby incurring greater risk of contracting COVID-19. The FCC has advised that the minimum speed for live streaming video platforms such as Zoom and Webex is 25 mbps or 4G, yet many "affordable" internet options in the Silicon Valley do not meet this low bar. Others advertise 25mbps or 4G speeds but limit through-put speeds (i.e. throttle) during peak hours or after a data threshold is reached. School teachers and administrators are making every effort to keep students on track internet access. We urge the Broadband Council to include actions in their plan that would prohibit California ISPs from engaging in practices that prevent students from accessing their education.

The Digital Equity Gap Has Widened During the Pandemic

Unequal access to fast, reliable internet is a pervasive problem that has only become more apparent during the pandemic. Inadequate, or nonexistent, standards have allowed ISPs to neglect and ignore low-income communities while installing fiber in middle class neighborhoods. This neglect is especially persistent in communities of color where ISPs have failed to adopt newer technologies. For example, the connectivity gap between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students at the same income level is as high as 20 percentage points.⁵ In many cities, the map of high-speed internet access and adoption closely resembles official housing redlining maps from the 1930s.⁶ We encourage the Broadband Council to include actions that will hold ISPs accountable for maintaining reasonably modern technologies and updated infrastructure in all the neighborhoods they serve, not just the wealthiest communities.

If you have questions about the content of this letter or would like to learn more about Santa Clara County Office of Education's Digital Equity Initiative, please do not hesitate to contact me directly at mdewan@sccoe.org or 408-453-6511 or contact Amanda Dickey, Director of Government Relations, at adickey@sccoe.org, or 530-301-3510.

³ A single parent of 1 child who makes \$15.25/hour would take home between \$998 and \$1,220/month and would make too much to qualify for most low-cost internet offers. The average cost of mid-tier internet in San Jose is between \$50 and \$100/month.

⁴ California's social services programs, such as childcare and health insurance, provide graduated subsidies based on income and generally subsidize 100% of costs for households of 4 with an annual income less than \$70,000.

⁵ USC Annenberg Research Institute, COVID-19 and the Distance Learning Gap.
<http://arnicusc.org/publications/covid-19-and-the-distance-learning-gap/>

⁶ On the Wrong Side of the Digital Divide, profile of digital and housing redlining in Oakland California.
<https://greenlining.org/publications/online-resources/2020/on-the-wrong-side-of-the-digital-divide/>



Santa Clara County Office of Education

Mary Ann Dewan, Ph.D.
County Superintendent of Schools

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary Ann Dewan".

Mary Ann Dewan, Ph.D.
Santa Clara County Superintendent of Schools