

Opinion – How Coronavirus Exposes Unequal Access to Education in America

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TANISHKA TALAGADADEEVI, APR 30 2020

In the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, public and private educational institutions across the country were faced with a difficult decision: send students home for the year and resume classes online in order to contain the spread of the virus. According to *The Journal's* David Nagel, as of April 29th 43 states mandated state-wide school closures for the remainder of the 2019-20 academic year. For thousands of students across the nation, panic set in. Families were faced with the realization that without adequate access to the Internet, their students could potentially fall behind. In lower-income and rural areas, access to broadband Internet services is more difficult to obtain. Although roughly 90 percent of American households report having access to computers (including smartphones), these statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics fail to take into consideration that reportedly having access to a computer is not equivalent to having adequate online access. Current statistics fail to represent families with multiple students who are not able to provide a computer to each member of the family. In some cases, families only have access to one monitor or PC. Access to a smartphone does not constitute a sufficient method of enabling students to complete online assignments or attend virtual courses. For thousands of Americans, COVID-19 has shed light on an arguable violation of their human rights.

According to a 2016 declaration from the United Nations, fair and free access to the Internet is considered a human right. The declaration states that it is essential to '[emphasize] that access to information on the Internet facilitates vast opportunities for affordable and inclusive education globally, thereby being an important tool to facilitate the promotion of the right to education'. The declaration continues by elaborating on the importance of this right, particularly to women and girls and persons with disabilities. The U.N. declaration aims to support feminist efforts to equalize opportunities between men and women. Throughout the declaration, emphasis is placed on the importance of Internet access to education.

As can be seen in the United States today, minorities and rural communities are being deeply affected by unequal access to the Internet, which directly impedes on their right to education. According to a report from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, over 30% of households with an income between \$25,000 and \$49,999 did not have access to high-speed Internet. In households with incomes less than \$25,000 less than 50% of households had access to high-speed internet. Among households earning less than \$50,000, an average 74% do not have access to any devices other than handhelds. The data presented in the report reveals a large economic and racial disparity of Internet access. In the era of COVID-19, this problem is more immediate. Companies like AT&T, Comcast, and Verizon have pledged to waive late-fees on Internet payments, offer free WiFi for 60 day periods, and expand hotspot availability as reported by ABC 10's Eric Escalante. Albeit helpful, these accommodations serve as temporary solutions to a widespread problem. The State and Federal governments are being called upon to take action against Internet equality through expanding educational budgets, specifically for underserved districts.

Rural and high-density urban communities face a common enemy. According to data collected by the Pew Research Center in 2018, nearly 25% of adults in rural communities say access to high-speed internet is 'a major problem'. This statistic is not dependent on household income; among families earning \$75,000 a year, 23% agree that Internet access is a major hurdle for rural communities, especially students. Although the workforce in rural areas is not as dependent on the Internet as the workforce in metropolitan areas, students have become the silent sufferers of the

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technological boom. In rural communities, online access is limited due to the providers' inability to extend the lines. For urban school districts, particularly those with a large percent of low-income students, subscription access is incredibly expensive.

Professors and teachers across the nation report low attendance numbers for their online courses, largely in part to the students' inability to access high-speed Internet on a PC. The coronavirus pandemic required rapid adjustments from public and private institutions; for many Americans, the switch from in-person sessions to online was more of a nuisance than an academic hurdle. For students without sustainable access to high-speed Internet and the appropriate devices, the switch was an additional hurdle they have to jump in order to compete academically with students across the nation.

While students with access to high-speed internet on more than just handheld devices are able to resume their studies, take advantage of online resources and materials, and even begin studying for major evaluations like the SAT, their peers without adequate access are left in the dust. The inequality of the value of education is not a novel issue. An inequality of wealth distribution in America affects Black and Hispanic communities at a larger rate than White communities. High-density urban districts with predominantly Black and Hispanic residents have faced economic adversity, largely as a product of systemic racism. The effects of systemic racism can be directly correlated to unequal access to education.

The American education system has long been plagued by the effects of systemic racism. Since the ratification of *Brown vs. the Board*, the fight against racism has taken a new form. In a nation where racial segregation was once the law of the land, *de facto* segregation is now the enemy of racial equality. *De facto* segregation seeps into several aspects of the lives of minorities, especially in education. Among minorities in America, Black and Hispanic communities experience systemic racism at a higher rate on average. It is no sheer coincidence that among members of the Hispanic and Black communities in America, a startling 91% of households reportedly only own handheld devices based on data provided in a 2013 report on technology from the Census Bureau.

This serves as an indication that access to high-speed Internet is not the only issue. A student simply cannot adequately complete their schoolwork on a smartphone. Many school districts provide laptops or tablets to their students for school-use, but in large urban districts, the budget simply does not support the rapid purchase and distribution of PCs required to accommodate students amid the pandemic.

As uncertainty looms over the world while COVID-19 curves begin to flatten, virologists warn that the world must be prepared for the worst. The possibility of COVID-19 returning next Winter still remains. The pandemic must serve as a wake-up call for legislators and school board members; far too many students are being disadvantaged by a lack of Internet access. This issue will not only affect students during their time in primary and secondary education but will continue to follow them into higher education. Their peers, many of whom have been privileged with high-speed access and their own laptops, have received a different education. As suggested by the U.N. report on the Right to Internet Access, access to Internet is an educational issue, a feminist issue, an economic issue, and a racial issue.

About the author:

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