

Opinion

# Opinion: Better learning in Oregon only comes through better online access

**It's difficult to stay educated without adequate internet resources.**

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We Oregonians are known for our lofty ideals. Time Magazine bolstered our reputation this week in this quote from Oregon Department of Education spokesman Marc Siegel: "You cannot open a 'brick-and-mortar' school in Oregon unless it is accessible to every student in their school district. The same rules apply to an online school."

But how does this policy play out now that all of our public schools are closed and all of our students, from kindergarten through university, are required to rely on "distance learning?" Dozens of Oregon schools have inadequate internet or none at all. Further, no one has accurate statistics for at-home broadband access, and at home is where our students are currently struggling to keep up.

In the time of COVID-19, it's clear that education is just one part of the broadband access problem. Health care professionals are adopting telehealth to keep providers and patients as safe as possible. Zoom is the ubiquitous business forum. Vital communications are taking place through social media, YouTube and other applications. The current crisis has demonstrated beyond doubt that broadband is vital for our physical, social, economic and physical health.

But vital and accessible are two different things. Internet communication is as fundamental to modern life as electricity but many communities — including hundreds of thousands of Oregonians — have minimal internet access or none at all.

In some cases, that's because we haven't built the physical infrastructure. For many Oregonians, it's because they can't afford services or don't understand how to use the technologies. Whatever the cause, the result is that many of us are without basic coping tools that we need at a time of crisis.

Business Oregon estimates that just 64 percent of urban households and a minority — 42 percent — of rural households



COURTESY OF REP. PAM MARSH

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have access that meets or exceeds the FCC's minimum standard — that's internet access with download speeds of at least 25 megabytes per second (Mbps) and upload speeds of at least 3 Mbps.

A disproportionate share of those on the wrong side of the digital divide are in lower income brackets. Nationally, 44 percent of adults in households with incomes below \$30,000 don't have broadband. Even accounting for income, Black and Latinx Americans lag behind in broadband adoption.

One thing a pandemic teaches us is that security is not a matter of "us" and "them." Infection is not class-conscious. People who aren't on-line must appear in person at clinics, unemployment offices or grocery stores. The risks that are forced upon these Oregonians because they lack technology are shared by all of us.

This is an alarming picture, but there is good news. Recognizing their pivotal role, without fanfare and at their own expense, small and large internet service providers across the state are stepping up. Eastern Oregon Telecom installed, free of charge, a 50-seat phone system and WiFi network in The Dalles for a tri-county Incident Command Center. Charter/Spectrum Communications opened its Wi-Fi hotspots for public use. Ashland Fiber Network is offering free service to university students and families with school-age children.

ISPs are absorbing the burden of missed payments, waiving late fees and offering free installation. But this generosity can't go on forever. Many internet providers are small businesses, trying to pay the rent just like everybody else. Depending on how long the COVID-19 crisis lasts, our internet industry may need federal or state relief.

When we get to recovery (and we will), the telecommunications industry will be a vital player in rebuilding our economy and our society. Based on the COVID-19 experience we will design new ways to operate our businesses, visit doctors and acquire new skills. We will need a robust telecommunications industry to help us create a sustainable future.

Full internet deployment will require a full commitment by our State government along with whatever we can get from the feds. For starters, we must fund and empower our Oregon Broadband office to identify gaps and help communities build services. We need investment dollars to ensure that every town, even the smallest, has the necessary infrastructure. Then we need make sure that every Oregonian can afford to plug in.

The current crisis is a test. Now we understand, if we didn't before, that our digital age can leave no one behind. Will we act on the lessons learned? Stay tuned. Oops, I mean "Stay connected."

*Rep. Pam Marsh represents a southern Oregon district that includes the city of Ashland.*