

Remote Learning with No Internet: The Effect COVID-19 is Having on the Homework Gap

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Remote learning is a part of our new normal, but what happens to those without reliable internet access? According to Jessica Denson, Communications Director for Connected Nation, a nonprofit on a mission to improve digital inclusion, the homework gap is created when students leave the classroom and the resources they once had are no longer available, thus creating a gap in their learning when they are at home. The homework gap is not a new issue, and as technology increasingly becomes embedded in our society, more students will be left behind. Prior to the pandemic, approximately 16.9 million school-aged children fell into the homework gap¹. COVID-19 has both revealed and widened the disparities between low-income and minority communities and their wealthy white counterparts, shifting the homework gap into a digital divide, as kids are no longer just falling behind on homework, but also in classwork. A study by McKinsey & Company² predicts that the pandemic will result in an overall learning loss of 6.8 months, whereas low-income students will have an average loss of 12.4 months. With uncertainty around the future of learning modes, and our reliance on the internet continuing to grow, how are we nurturing the educations of our most vulnerable?

AT&T, wanting to bridge the homework gap, donated \$10 million to the nonprofit Connected Nation to help them provide free hotspots and internet service to organizations and schools that help at risk children. This partnership provided 35,000 vulnerable students with internet access. One community that is currently benefiting from the Connected Nation and AT&T initiative is the Roots and Wings organization in Delray Beach, Florida. The organization's Project Uplift program currently has the capacity to assist 540 students from first through fourth grade, to pass their third-grade literacy exam. The program provides those that are struggling readers with free after school assistance, placing them in small groups with certified teachers based on their current reading levels. Many of the students in the program have limited access to resources, including internet and devices, so their reading and homework help is hindered when they get home. The hotspots provided will help Roots and Wings not only adjust to the current remote learning situation but, will also provide students and their families with long-term internet access that will continue to advance their education.

Founder of Roots and Wings, Ted Hoskinson, predicts the demand for their program will increase as a result of the pandemic; "at Orchard View last year there were 17 kids in the third grade reading at the first-grade level, and this year there were 40." When asked why Project Uplift is so important Hoskinson said, setting kids up for success early on is the most economical way to make a difference while also providing the child hope and encouragement. So why is passing the third-grade literacy exam so critical? Hoskinson explains, "if you don't pass the third-grade test there is a 74% chance you are not going to graduate from high school. However, if you pass that third-grade test and you are in a poverty situation there is an 89% chance you are going to graduate from high school, and it is exactly the same number as a child who is given every opportunity: goes to private school, has tutoring, and anything else they need." But Project Uplift does more than teach reading, it instills in its students the key to success, "showing up," and it provides a safe space for the kids to do so, "you are in a classroom where no one is laughing at you, everyone is at the same level, and you have people working together to accomplish a common goal." The safety and support provided creates consistency that Hoskinson says is critical for learning and communicates to the students that there are people that truly care about their education.

Roots and Wings is only one of 124 organizations participating in the AT&T and Connected Nation hotspot program, with more needing assistance. Jessica Denson described the program as just the start, stating "we want to work with any provider that wants to help vulnerable populations and close the digital divide." Moving forward we must stop thinking of internet access as a luxury, but rather as a necessity. As we rely more on technology, the digital inequities will only worsen if governments, companies, organizations, schools, and individuals do not intervene. We owe it to our communities to "show up" and do our part to end the homework gap.

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¹ Martin, M. (2021). *Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2018*. U.S. Census Bureau.

² Emma Dorn, B. H. (2020). *COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime*. McKinsey & Company.