#SendTheSignal

A Call for Federal Action to End the Digital Divide

October 2020

Overview

The start of the new school year brought a return to in-person learning for some students, but many schools continue to hold classes online. In today's interconnected world—amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic—children can't do their schoolwork without an internet signal at home. Nearly 17 million students across America do not have access to high-speed internet. The problem disproportionately affects children of color, those from low-income families, and students who were already behind in their learning.

Young people are going to great lengths to attend virtual classes and do their work. Some have fired up their laptops from the parking lots of fast food restaurants with free Wi-Fi; others are trying to complete assignments on their family's cell phone. School systems, likewise, are doing all they can to get students connected. **But the digital divide is too great a problem for schools to solve on their own. Educators should not have to bear the immense burden of getting thousands upon thousands of their students a home internet connection.**

The core mission of our schools is to educate children. It is the federal government's responsibility to act in the public interest when there is a clear and compelling need—as there most certainly is now. **The federal government must work with internet service providers and others to create a comprehensive and lasting national solution for universal broadband.** If it fails to do so, the current crisis will further harm children and families, exacerbate inequities, and contribute to serious economic decline, effects that would be felt for generations to come.

Chiefs for Change, a bipartisan network of state and district education leaders, is working to ensure every student has the technology and connectivity they need to learn. This brief outlines innovative practices from across our membership and calls on the federal government and industry to end the digital divide and **#SendTheSignal** to every home in America.

Initial Response to School Closures

Schools are the heart of our communities. They educate our children and are a trusted lifeline for millions of families, providing essential updates on public health and emergency measures as well as connections to crucial social services and local resources. When COVID-19 forced school buildings to close in the spring, districts rapidly shifted to distance learning. For many, the first step was surveying families and staff to determine the number of people who had a device and a way to get online. The results were disturbing. Some districts found that tens of thousands of their students did not have technology and connectivity for a meaningful distance learning experience. In a matter of days, systems distributed laptops and tablets collected from school buildings and loaned hotspots to students. When the inventory ran out, leaders turned to other strategies.

Like many in our network, Susan Enfield, superintendent of Highline Public Schools near Seattle, Washington, reached out to philanthropic partners and municipalities for emergency grant support and asked individual donors to sponsor families in need of broadband access for $140 per year. In North Carolina, Guilford County Schools (GCS), under the leadership of Superintendent Sharon Contreras, installed hotspots on school buses and parked them in high-need neighborhoods so children in the area could log on for class. The district also partnered with local colleges, universities, and organizations that provided hotspots, which were strategically relocated to offer expanded Wi-Fi coverage. In addition, GCS opened learning centers on campuses in communities with poor internet connectivity and created a Saturday Internet Hub, allowing students to use school internet and technology to complete assignments. Other systems negotiated short-term agreements with internet service providers or gave families maps showing free Wi-Fi sites at schools, churches, and community centers.

To support efforts in members' systems, Chiefs for Change awarded $450,000 in emergency relief aid. Districts used the funds to purchase hotspots as well as distance learning software designed for children with special needs.

Stopgap measures such as those described above helped schools make it through the end of the last academic year.

Initiatives to Meet the Continued Need

As the COVID-19 pandemic wears on, chiefs continue to grapple with problems related to the digital divide. While they have highlighted the need for more federal support to address the tremendous challenges at hand, they know their students can't afford to wait. As such, systems leaders have begun working to implement localized, longer-term efforts to get students connected. The following is a snapshot of some of the various approaches.

Leveraging Dark Fiber in San Antonio

Building on technology investments made in the early days of the pandemic, San Antonio Independent School District, under the leadership of Chiefs for Change board chair Pedro Martinez, is partnering with the city to leverage unused "dark fiber" in a plan to connect students' homes to schools' Wi-Fi networks. From traffic lights, libraries, and other connection points along the existing network, crews are running new fiber optic cables into neighborhoods where people do not currently have access to the Web. This allows students to link to their school's network as if they were inside the physical school building.

Providing Over-the-Air Internet in Boulder

Nearly all students in Colorado's Boulder Valley School District now have a home internet connection thanks in large part to an innovative partnership between the district and a local service provider. Through an agreement approved by the school board in April, the provider is installing transmitter/receivers on school rooftops that allow customers within a two- to three-mile radius to obtain an over-the-air internet connection. The service is available at no cost for families with children who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Previously, the district purchased Wi-Fi hotspots or low-cost "internet essentials" packages for students who could not get online from home. With the over-the-air service, the district is transitioning families to a more permanent and reliable solution. The service provider is installing antennae at new schools every couple of weeks. Superintendent Rob Anderson believes the approach could be adopted by other systems, especially if the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) eases restrictions on the use of E-Rate funds.

Blanketing Neighborhoods with Free Wi-Fi in Phoenix

Phoenix Union High School District, led by Superintendent Chad Gestson, is implementing a citywide Wi-Fi initiative known as the "Network for the Future." The goal is to blanket Arizona's capital city with free Wi-Fi by building a network through a public-private collaboration that includes every local school, community college, the City of Phoenix, Maricopa County, and several businesses and community partners. Currently, the community is working on a small pilot covering four square miles and hopes to create a replicable model.

Expanding Broadband Statewide in Mississippi

The Mississippi Department of Education, where Chiefs for Change board member Carey Wright serves as superintendent, is pursuing a plan to increase educational equity by ensuring every student in the state has the technology to learn at school and at home. Mississippi received $1.25 billion in federal COVID-19 relief funds. The department is using $200 million of that allotment to fund its Mississippi Connects plan, which includes purchasing computer devices for all students and teachers; software to deliver instruction; enhanced internet connectivity in unserved areas; and professional development for digital teaching and learning. It is seeking additional public and private support to strengthen and sustain its digital learning initiative over the long term.

Treating the Internet as an Essential Service in Cleveland

Cleveland is the "worst-connected" large city in the country—nearly two-thirds of families with children in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) do not have internet at home. In an effort to move away from temporary hotspots and toward a lasting solution, CEO Eric Gordon is working with community partners to make the internet an essential service, like electricity, heat, and water. The plan calls for the district to pay less than $20 per month per home to connect families and ensure low-income students have the same access to online resources as their more affluent peers.

Launching Programs to Get Students Online in Chicago and Philadelphia

Chicago Public Schools (CPS), under the leadership of CEO and Chiefs for Change board member Janice K. Jackson, launched Chicago Connected, a groundbreaking initiative to deliver free, high-speed internet service to approximately 100,000 CPS students. The first-of-its-kind program is one of the largest and longest-term efforts by any community to give students in need free, high-speed home internet over the course of four years. Meanwhile, under Superintendent William R. Hite, Jr., the School District of Philadelphia collaborated with the City of Philadelphia, Comcast, and other local partners to create PHLConnectED. The initiative aims to provide free internet access for up to 35,000 students who do not have reliable service.

Eric S. Gordon, CEO @EricGordon_CEO · Oct 3
It's official! We have lit the internet in the Central neighborhood as part of @empowerCLE #empowerCMSD. Come out today at the Cedar Ext High Rise for $18 high speed reliable internet! #TurnOnCentral @DigitalC @CLEMetroSchools @CuyahogaHousing @ClevelandWard5

Chicago Public Schools @ChiPubSchools · Jul 28
Increasing Chicagoans' access to the internet is a step towards creating a more equitable, inclusive community.

Chicago Public Schools @ChiPubSchools · Jul 28
Learn more about Chicago Connected - a $50 million investment to provide up to four years of high speed internet for 100,000 students in high-need communities at no cost: http://cps.edu/chicagoconnected...

Philadelphia Schools @PHLschools · Sep 22
No internet connection? K-12 families may qualify for no-cost service. Find out if you are eligible, DIAL 2-1-1 and press option 1. For more info visit: http://phila.gov/programs/phlconnected/

PHL ConnectED
NO INTERNET CONNECTION? K-12 FAMILIES MAY QUALIFY FOR NO-COST SERVICE.
TO FIND OUT IF YOU'RE ELIGIBLE AND SIGN UP:
DIAL 211
VISIT
PHILA.GOV/PHLCONNECTED
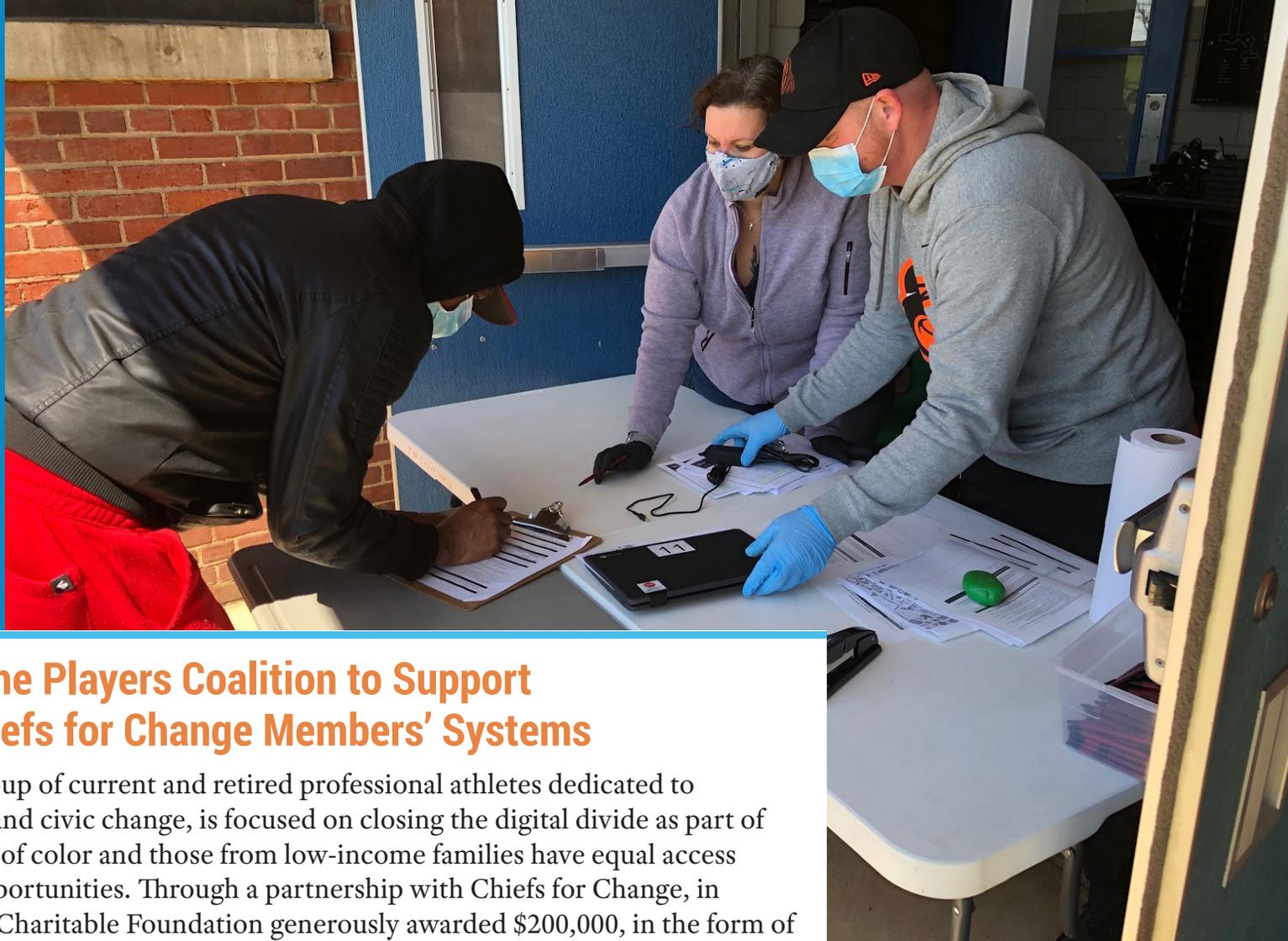
New Grants from the Players Coalition to Support Connectivity in Chiefs for Change Members' Systems

The Players Coalition, a group of current and retired professional athletes dedicated to promoting systemic social and civic change, is focused on closing the digital divide as part of its effort to ensure children of color and those from low-income families have equal access to excellent educational opportunities. Through a partnership with Chiefs for Change, in October, Players Coalition Charitable Foundation generously awarded $200,000, in the form of individual $50,000 grants, to support connectivity initiatives in four of our members' systems.

Extending Internet Access in Baltimore

By collaborating with local organizations, Baltimore City Public Schools CEO Sonja Santelises and her team have been able to get internet service through the end of 2020 for most families in the district who need it. But students will require access to the Web long after that. The Players Coalition grant will allow the district to extend internet access through the end of the school year for more than 400 families.
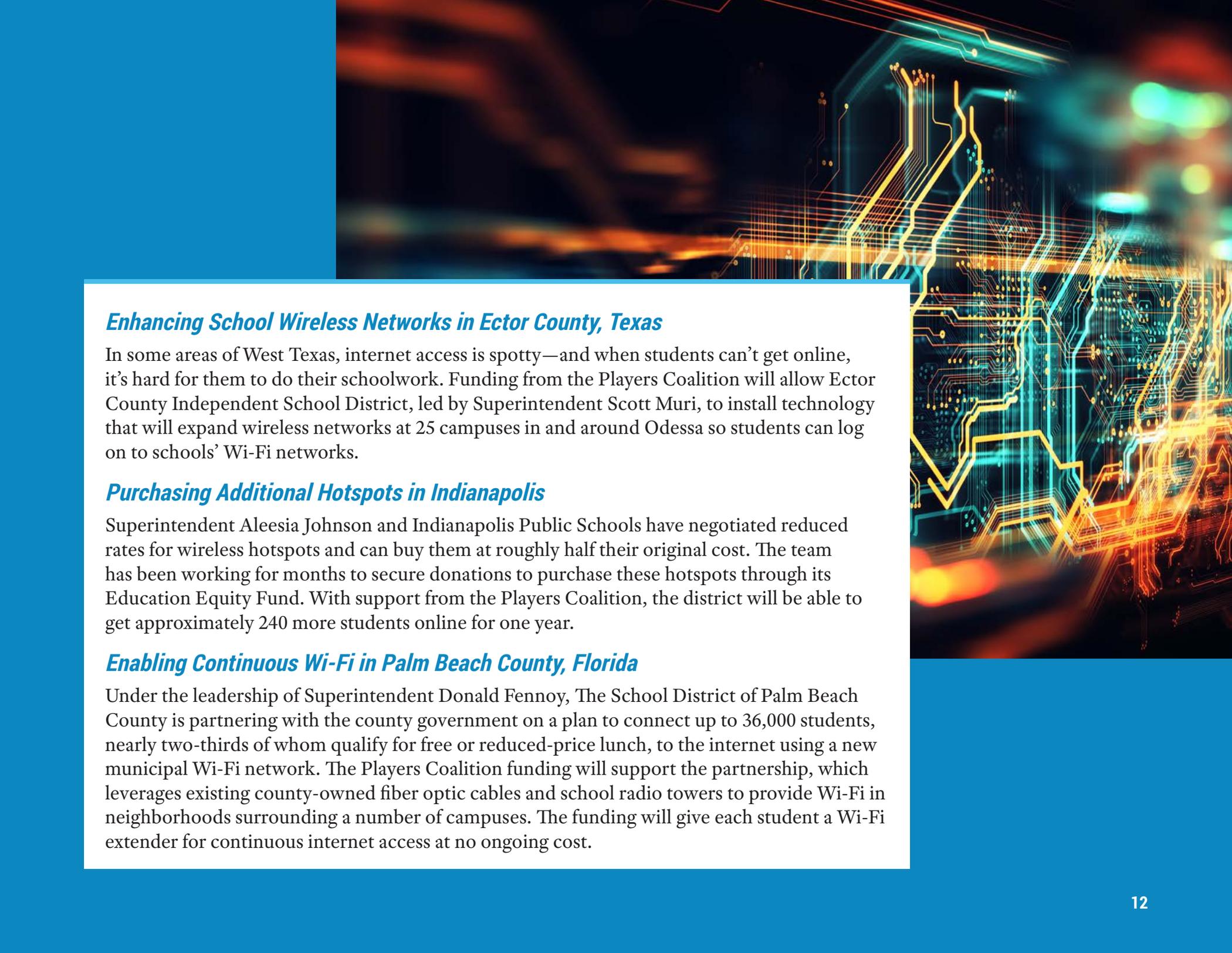
Enhancing School Wireless Networks in Ector County, Texas

In some areas of West Texas, internet access is spotty—and when students can't get online, it's hard for them to do their schoolwork. Funding from the Players Coalition will allow Ector County Independent School District, led by Superintendent Scott Muri, to install technology that will expand wireless networks at 25 campuses in and around Odessa so students can log on to schools' Wi-Fi networks.

Purchasing Additional Hotspots in Indianapolis

Superintendent Aleesia Johnson and Indianapolis Public Schools have negotiated reduced rates for wireless hotspots and can buy them at roughly half their original cost. The team has been working for months to secure donations to purchase these hotspots through its Education Equity Fund. With support from the Players Coalition, the district will be able to get approximately 240 more students online for one year.

Enabling Continuous Wi-Fi in Palm Beach County, Florida

Under the leadership of Superintendent Donald Fennoy, The School District of Palm Beach County is partnering with the county government on a plan to connect up to 36,000 students, nearly two-thirds of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, to the internet using a new municipal Wi-Fi network. The Players Coalition funding will support the partnership, which leverages existing county-owned fiber optic cables and school radio towers to provide Wi-Fi in neighborhoods surrounding a number of campuses. The funding will give each student a Wi-Fi extender for continuous internet access at no ongoing cost.

These are admirable—and necessary—endeavors. Yet despite education leaders' concerted work to provide technology and connectivity, massive needs remain. Furthermore, without a holistic solution, our nation will end up with a patchwork of initiatives that offer varying degrees of access at best, and that perpetuate historical inequities and threaten our collective prosperity at worst. If the federal government and internet service companies do not act to provide universal broadband, children with means will be able to continue learning, and those without will be left behind.

Internet for All

The pandemic has made obvious to the broader public what those in education have long known: People need the internet to function in today's world. Earlier this year, Superintendent Martinez called for a grand initiative that would expand broadband to every home. The federal government can drive a project of this scale.

Corporate grants here and there and temporary reduced-cost plans may provide limited, localized assistance, and donations from individuals and community foundations may allow districts to support one child at a time. Such efforts have been critical to this point, but as Superintendent Enfield said, it is appalling that schools must "hold the equivalent of a bake sale-type fundraiser for something that should be available to every student."

All children have a fundamental right to a high-quality education. We deny them that right when they don't have access to the internet and adequate technology. The future of an entire generation of students, and our country's overall progress, is at stake. **In this moment, the federal government must create the conditions and incentives for change and work with service providers and others to develop new infrastructure that will bring the internet to every corner of America.**

Through conversations with Vice President Mike Pence, members of Congress, and U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos as well as correspondence with FCC Chairman Ajit Pai and the heads of major internet companies, Chiefs for Change continues to advocate for universal broadband. Members of our network sounded the alarm months ago. They have repeatedly emphasized the need, testifying before congressional committees, appearing on news programs, and talking to anyone who will listen.

The federal government *has* taken some important steps. These include programs to support expanded broadband through the FCC, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, as well as emergency coronavirus relief aid approved by Congress and the president. **Yet there is bipartisan agreement that more help is needed. Elected officials on both sides of the aisle have indicated a willingness to take additional action, but they have not yet coalesced around specific plans.** There are a number of proposed approaches, ranging from expanding E-Rate funding, typically reserved for schools and libraries, to cover technology and connectivity in students' homes; new funding streams to incentivize public-private partnerships; funding to states that would be allocated by formula to support digital equity; competitive grant funding for projects led by individuals, groups, and coalitions; and subsidies, tax breaks, and low-cost loans to help organizations with a public purpose build reliable and affordable internet connections; among others.

As a network of bipartisan leaders from across the United States, we are not, as of this writing, endorsing any single, specific plan. **Rather, we urge Democrats and Republicans—in the strongest possible terms—to unite around viable solutions that remove obstacles to learning and approve the resources to implement those solutions *now*.**

More than ever, America's students need universal broadband so they can attend class online when school buildings are closed, accelerate their learning at night when school buildings are open, and access the wealth of information they need to succeed in our interconnected world.