Ethical Concerns of School Closures for Low-Income School Aged Children

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 forced students to shift to online learning highlighting a disparity in access to the internet. A lack of internet access made it difficult for low-income children to seamlessly transition to an online learning environment. The amount of support provided for educational infrastructure is insufficient; more needs to be done to ensure equality in internet accessibility for school-aged children. The role of government must include a plan to provide computers and internet access to achieve education equity and level the playing field for students of all incomes.

Keywords: Education ethics, Access to technology, low-income education, bioethics, poverty

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is the latest threat to educational equity.[1] The use of technology for work, school, and social interaction has increased for many Americans yet not all have access to technology necessary to fully participate. One of the groups most impacted, but often overlooked, is the youth who were forced to shift from in-person to online classrooms. Many K-12 institutions closed schools promptly to ensure the safety of their students, faculty, and staff. However, as reliance on the internet was a necessary precondition to successful online learning, the lack of internet access in low-income communities dealt a devastating setback to children from underprivileged families. Many parents recently furloughed from their jobs due to the virus were unable to bear the costs associated with adequate technology for their children's education. This lack of

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access to the internet and computers has been termed in the literature the "homework gap" — which refers to the lack of minimum connectivity children need in order to complete schoolwork at home. COVID-19 has highlighted the digital divide among upper- and lower-income groups, and the emerging "homework gap" in low-income families must be taken into consideration when attempting to reach the goals of government agencies, policymakers, and educational institutions.[2]

ANALYSIS

I. Income, Race, and Lack of Internet Access

As early as March 16, 2020, widespread school closures due to COVID-19 began to take place in the United States. Some schools remained closed throughout the duration of the academic semester (March-May) while others began to quickly and effortlessly shift to an online platform for student learning and engagement to close out the semester. Stonegate Elementary in Irvine, California was one school that continued online core math and English classes shortly after school closures.[3] Yet the same cannot be said for New Oxford Middle School in rural Pennsylvania where students have consistently reported not having access to computers and a reliable way to get online.[4] In addition, the technology inequities that exist between schools with majority low-income and those with majority high-income students are numerous and the impact of the digital divide on these communities is concerning. Roughly one-third (35 percent) of households with children ages 6 to 17 and an annual income below $30,000 a year do not have a high-speed internet connection at home, compared with just 6 percent of households earning $75,000 or more a year.[5] If online education becomes the norm for the foreseeable future, a generation of low-income children will be missing months of formal education widening the education gap between poorer and wealthier students.

The lack of access to the internet and computers that affects low-income groups disproportionately hurts families of color. School closures heightened the digital divide that existed prior to January 2020. 70 percent of educators assign online work; however, 12 million children do not have Wi-Fi access.[6] The lack of internet access contributes to the increased chronic absenteeism patterns surfacing during this pandemic. Chronic absenteeism is characterized as a child missing 15 or more days of school per year[7] and has social implications for many school aged children. The rate of chronic absenteeism is particularly high in schools with many low-income students. Chronic absenteeism has been associated with poor academic performance and high dropout rates, and it is an important predictor of both low income in adulthood and poor lifetime health.[8] As a result, a generation of low-income children is more likely to socially reproduce another generation of low-income children.

In this country, there is also a racial divide among internet users. A 2017 report from the Democratic staff of the Joint Economic Committee found that White residents are more likely to have internet connections in their homes than people of color.[9] Students of color who are unable to turn in homework assignments or join class sessions will be at an increased risk of failing courses and having to repeat grades. The burden of having to pay for and acquire the internet is not equally distributed and represents an injustice stemming from racial inequity.

School closures have also heightened other disparities in low-income households. When there is an infectious disease outbreak transmissible through human-to-human contact like COVID-19, the World Health Organization recommends school closures to limit disease spread.[10] However, the closing of all schools for children in grades K-12 should not be taken lightly as school provides a space for students to gain essential social, mental, and educational growth. Underprivileged students tend to have fewer educational

opportunities beyond school and the closing of schools has made this disparity ever more present.[11] When schools close, some parents facilitate learning for their children. However, some parents with limited time due to work, limited education, and resource constraints cannot provide the oversight necessary. Despite schools closing, parents still must work even if that means despite great effort to secure childcare, they must occasionally leave a child without childcare. The child's likelihood of failing to login online for class if the family has access to technology and failure to do educational tasks that do not require computers would then increase. Children who are not supervised at home may engage in more risky behaviors.[12] These separate but interrelated potential issues demonstrate how educational disparities that previously existed between low- and high-income students can be exacerbated by the recent school closures. School closures not only have practical implications like lack of internet accessibility, but they have social ones. Schools are used as vehicles of socialization that can provide a potential haven for students with difficult lives at home. When you take away one of the main sources of social interaction and abuse surveillance locations like schools, unforeseen consequences for school aged children and their parents can result.

II. Private Sector Solutions

The digital divide is characterized by various barriers to access including cost and internet access. Internet providers have sponsored and marketed programs to provide a "solution" to low-income communities without equitable access to the internet. AT&T Communications, an internet service provider, created a COVID-19 response deal for low-income households where participants pay ten dollars a month for internet access. However, ironically, the quickest and most effective way to apply is online. If families do not have access to the internet, then it would most likely follow that they would have limited to no access to a computer in order to apply online. The other option listed is for families to print a form and mail it to the company. However, families without internet access most likely do not have access to a printer. In addition, the program is only offered in 21 states and, as a result, the benefits of the programs are disproportionately spread.[13] Comcast, another internet provider, offers similar online applications as well as the option of calling over the phone; however, the recipient gets only 60 days of access. In addition, the company provides refurbished computers for $149.99 plus tax.[14] Although these expenses may seem small, for an unemployed parent with no source of income, ten dollars per month for the internet is a major expense. Programs like these are only a temporary solution to the digital divide fraught with limitations like short time periods, barriers to apply, and a price tag rather than free access. Through government programs, public schools could potentially provide internet access free to their students.

III. Government Solutions

There are differing opinions of whose responsibility it is to provide internet access. Roughly half (52 percent) of Democrats and independents who lean toward the Democratic Party believe it is the federal government's responsibility to ensure Americans have a high-speed internet connection at home during the outbreak. By comparison, a smaller share (22 percent) of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents hold this view about the government ensuring home broadband access.[15] Three stimulus packages have been passed to date in response to COVID-19: the Families First Coronavirus Response Act,[16] the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act,[17] and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act—also known as the CARES Act.[18] The Families First Coronavirus Response Act provided paid sick leave, tax credits, free COVID-19 testing, expanded food assistance and unemployment benefits, and increased Medicaid funding. The Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act provided aid for the Food and Drug Administration(FDA) for salaries and expenses, small business administrative costs, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Institutes of Health (NIH), the office of the

secretary, and other administrative groups and roles. The CARES Act appropriated funds to aid individuals ($603.7 billion), big businesses ($500 billion), small businesses ($377 billion), state and local governments ($340 billion), and public services ($179.5 billion). Of the three bills passed, only 1.5 percent of the aid from the CARES Act was allocated for the Education Stabilization Fund for all states. There has been widespread agreement that educational institutions will require more than what was allotted so far to continue to provide education to students.[19] In a letter to House and Senate leadership, 35 US senators are pushing for the next stimulus package to provide $2 trillion to close the "homework gap."[20] Some Republicans have stalled stating that they want to ensure that money already allocated in past packages is being properly distributed. Democrats are looking to include major digital infrastructure upgrades in the next phase of legislation such as changes to broadband and 5G to improve America's remote connectivity.

It is the responsibility of government agencies to promote the general welfare of citizens per the preamble to the US Constitution. The government generally achieves the aim of providing basic necessities through social improvement programs.[21] Providing equitable internet access for all students could ultimately disrupt the cycle of poverty in at-risk families. Opportunities and growth are limited when access to the internet is unavailable or limited. The government is the appropriate provider of internet because of technologies' outsized role in participation in society. Internet freedom should not only be the right to uncensored internet and net neutrality, but also a right to access to the internet. It would be unjust to have a freedom that can be enjoyed only by the middle class and the wealthy. Low-income Americans without access to the internet would be unable to access better jobs and create economic wealth. Government should strive for the ethical goal of leveling the playing field so that all have equal opportunity. Education is a special good that the government provides so that regardless of race or income level, people can secure better paying jobs, save more money, and become less likely to need government assistance in the future. While some may argue that the government does not need to provide internet access, it is a fundamental part of modern education, necessary to the mission of public school for everyone, and essential during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSION

This public health crisis has exposed a technological one. Schools closed in early March and some were able to smoothly transition to an online platform more quickly than others. Many families experienced job loss, death, and uncertainty prior to considering the implications of a lack of internet access. In addition, communities of color struggled with the deaths of innocent black people at the hands of law enforcement adding to their stress, vulnerability, and outrage. The unequal burden of barriers to internet access exacerbates racial inequity, highlighting the need for Black Lives Matter to extend to technology injustice. Many of the most vulnerable pockets of our nation, rural and inner-city low-income communities, have limited or no access to computers or the internet; our youth are paying the price for this disparity known as the digital divide. Corporate programs like those offered by AT&T and Comcast simply serve as a band aid to an ever-bleeding wound. The government is the proper entity to take this on. Part of public-school education is ensuring every child has access to the tools necessary to learn. If more is not done to address the lack of internet access for low-income groups, then there will be an entire generation of low-income students who fall behind or drop out of school. The educational and social benefits of an online community during COVID-19 should be equally shared among all children to create a level playing field and a better future.

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