Local School Districts Hone Post-COVID Digital Plans
By Jake Hartvigsen

School districts across the country were some of the most dramatically impacted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and our local districts were no exception. Almost overnight, district officials in DeSoto, Charlotte, Manatee, and Sarasota counties were forced to develop and implement e-learning strategies and provide students and teachers with access to internet connectivity, devices, and other digital tools and needs that previously had been limited to just a small percentage of their student populations taking Florida virtual classes.

While the impact of these rapid transitions, caused by COVID-19, on student learning outcomes will be studied and debated for years to come, the Herculean tasks performed by district administrators and teachers both locally and around the country cannot be overstated.

As the pandemic showed signs of weakening, we contacted the chief technology officers for each of the local school districts to find out their plans for digital access going forward. Here is what we learned.

DeSoto County
DeSoto County Schools' Director of Information Technology Mike Roberts said that schools in DeSoto County will be moving back to a purely brick-and-mortar setting.

Aspirations Journalism: Get a $50 subsidy through the FCC’s Emergency Broadband Benefit.
By Justin Garcia

Millions of Americans now can qualify for a $50-per-month subsidy to pay for broadband internet, thanks to the stimulus bill passed in December.

The Federal Communication Commission (FCC) has announced that households can apply for the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) beginning on May 12. The program, which teams up with broadband providers, offers a $50 discount on broadband bills ($75 for those living on tribal lands) and a $100 discount toward devices.

Who qualifies for EBB, and how do people apply for the program?

According to the FCC, a household is eligible if it meets any of these criteria:

- Has an income that is at or below 135% of the federal poverty guidelines or participates in certain assistance programs, such as SNAP, Medicaid, or Lifeline
- Is approved to receive benefits under the federal free and reduced-price school lunch program or the school breakfast program, including through the USDA Community Eligibility Provision in the 2019-2020 or 2020-2021 school year
The county will be moving back to a purely brick-and-mortar environment, starting with summer school this June.

Students who currently have Chromebooks and hotspots at home will be asked to return those before the end of the current school year so that the district can conduct a complete inventory and repair and update existing devices as needed. This is something Roberts said has not been done in two years because of COVID-19.

The goal is to continue DeSoto's 1:1 ratio of Chromebooks per student in the district, something that he said will be aided by $100,000 recently approved by the Florida Legislature for the county to purchase new devices for students and classrooms. He said that the school district is also exploring federal and state grants, as needed, to augment these funds.

While the school district does not plan to provide asynchronous learning opportunities during the upcoming year, students will be able to choose a "work at your own pace" virtual option offered through the district's DeSoto Virtual Academy.

**Manatee County**

Similar to DeSoto county, Manatee County Schools' Chief Technology Officer Scott Hansen said that the district has seen a steady return of e-learners to brick-and-mortar classrooms since early January. The district will be offering traditional brick-and-mortar instructional offerings in summer school at over 30 selected sites (elementary, middle, and high school) starting in June.

The district will continue to offer pre-COVID virtual instruction opportunities in 2021-2022. Look for additional communication and updates via the district website.

Hansen said that the district recently received 12,000 Chromebooks, which had been on backorder since July, and will enter the 2021-2022 school year with over 36,000 Chromebook devices available. This is in addition to more than 20,000 Windows devices currently available to students, teachers, and administrative staff.

Another positive note was that the district recently was awarded more than 4,000 hotspot devices as part of TMobile's Project 10Million program. Each of these devices provides 100GB of data per year for five years at no cost to the district. Hansen said that the district is currently devising its plan for distributing these devices for the 2021-2022 school year and that ALICE families are among its top priorities.

**Sarasota County**

While Sarasota County Schools is still awaiting direction from the Florida Department of Education regarding what instruction will look like next year, Director of Information Technology Joe Binswanger said that he expects it to be more pre-COVID like than it has been for the past year. This includes the return of students to more traditional summer learning and "summer boost" programs starting this June.

Despite the anticipated return to a more brick-and-mortar environment, which district administrators feel will benefit students, Binswanger said there are lessons learned from the past year that will help improve current and future instruction.

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**How to apply for the Emergency Broadband Benefit**

**How to help spread the word about the Emergency Broadband Benefit**

**More information about the Emergency Broadband Benefit**

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learned from the pandemic that he feels will benefit the district in the years ahead. These include ongoing efforts to bolster technology, not just via hardware enhancements but through a better understanding of ways to keep students and teachers more effectively connected.

He said that the pandemic also helped the school district take a more "agnostic" approach to technology, ensuring that applications used in classrooms are ones that can be applied across platforms regardless of the type of computer a student and their family may have at home. The district is also planning to offer more check-out opportunities for students next year so that students from ALICE families can have access to computer devices that they may not have at home.

Like Manatee County, Sarasota County Schools also was awarded access to 3,000 hotspots to distribute free to families as part of TMobile's Project 10Million program.

Charlotte County
While we reached out to Charlotte County Schools about their plans for this summer and beyond, we could not connect in time for this article. As we learn more, we will update readers in an upcoming issue of the newsletter.

Meet Our New DA4A Team
Members: Cheri Coryea & Maribel Martinez

Cheri Coryea
Maribel Martinez

The DA4A initiative is excited to welcome Cheri Coryea and Maribel Martinez to the team!

Cheri's public sector experience spans over 30 years. While the majority of it has been in Manatee County, Florida, the nature of the work has allowed her to build bonds regionally and nationally with thought and management leader networks. The last 14 years of Cheri's public sector work included roles as county administrator, deputy county administrator, and first director of the Neighborhood Services Department for Manatee County Government. She continues to strive to positively impact ALICE through her involvement with organizations that help our community.

In March and April, The Patterson Foundation's Digital Access for All initiative held two webversations with Sarasota and Manatee partners, including 19 governmental and nonprofit organizations. During these collaborative sessions, community organizations and institutions shared the challenges they face serving asset-limited families and individuals with limited or no access to devices, skills training, and internet in our region. Although many organizations have programs to address digital access issues, other challenges exist, like awareness, an understanding of people's needs, and sustainability.

In our first meeting on March 25, participants quickly learned they were not alone. Several local nonprofits, organizations, libraries, schools, and governments are all working to address the digital needs of their community and experience similar barriers. One of the silver linings was the recurring theme of promoting awareness of each other's services, expanding outreach, and filling in existing service gaps.

Increasing people's awareness of available resources became the focus of our session on April 25. Two significant ideas emerged: leveraging the 211 SuncoastCares system and creating a network of digital navigators.

Chris Russi, Community Fiscal Agent and Liaison at The Glasser/Schoenbaum Human Services Center, shared 211's current and potential role in digital access for all. Residents of Desoto, Manatee, and Sarasota County can contact 211 to access social services like free and confidential crisis and emergency counseling, food, healthcare, employment, and housing services.

Within the platform, 277 agencies with an additional 231 sites provide over 1,200 programs. Each agency can make changes to their provided information and resources in real-time. Several codes exist to refer to internet services like discounted internet service. However, other possible codes could be applicable for digital access.

Digital access consultant, Maribel Martinez, explored the concept of a digital navigator. Several organizations already serve as digital navigators in our region, yet there are possibilities to maximize their services and build a larger network. Digital navigators are an asset to any community because they provide individualized or small-group assistance to community members who need affordable home internet service, computing devices, and digital-literacy training to fully benefit from the internet and its opportunities. Assistance may be provided in person, by phone, virtually, via email, or text. Maribel describes digital navigators as people who are empathic, organized, problem solvers, and excellent communicators.

Manatee and Sarasota counties offer services to connect ALICE populations and households to devices, skills, and the internet. However, these services are often underused because people do not know about them. By leveraging 211 and creating a digital navigator network, we can encourage collaboration, bring awareness, and
Maribel Martinez is a social-sector leader with over 25 years of experience in education and nonprofit management. Maribel is considered a national digital inclusion expert and has first-hand experience collaborating with HUD-assisted housers to implement multi-year digital equity plans. She's also worked with industry partners on targeted outreach campaigns aimed at income-constrained people, created and led public-private partnerships across multiple sectors to close the digital divide, developed computer and tablet training curricula and train-the-trainer programs, worked with stakeholders to build capacity and create talent pipelines into college and tech for asset-limited communities, and developed innovative processes to accelerate tech adoption for hundreds of thousands of end-beneficiaries. Maribel's blended and virtual digital skills-training curricula for secondary students, working-age individuals, and older adults have been adopted in 30 U.S. cities and counting.

Join Maribel on Twitter: @MMartTPF

Do you have a resource or idea to share with the community? Is there a national, regional, or local effort you'd like us to know about or feature in future publications? Contact DA4A at digitalaccess@thepattersonfoundation.org to be considered.