



Monroe County, Local Funders Collaborate to Solve Internet Connectivity Issues Faced by up to 5,000 Rochester City School District Students

The COVID-19 pandemic uncovered glaring gaps in technology for students in the City of Rochester. Local and national foundations and others responded quickly to get laptop computers, tablets, and devices to provide internet connections into the homes of students who needed them.

The continuation of remote learning for Rochester City School District (RCSD) students this fall raised another issue: Individual WiFi hotspot devices distributed in the spring for use at home have not provided enough speed and a consistent connection required for effective online learning.

Monroe County, ESL, Greater Rochester Health Foundation (GRHF), and Rochester Area Community Foundation (RACF) are collaborating with RCSD on a solution to improve internet connectivity to help more students actively participate in their lessons throughout the school day.

“I am extremely grateful for the generosity and innovative spirit of our partners who are helping to ensure that our students receive the best education possible during a global pandemic,” says RCSD Superintendent Dr. Lesli Myers-Small. “For many of us, having reliable internet access is a given. For many of our students, getting this access will not only help with their education, it also brings them to a more equitable playing field.”

T-Mobile’s Project 10Million is donating 2,900 WiFi hotspots to be distributed to RCSD students in kindergarten through high school who don’t have reliable internet connections.

Monroe County has committed to using up to \$175,000 of the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act money to cover the \$43,000 monthly connectivity costs for those devices through December 31.

“As we continue to navigate this unprecedented pandemic, we need to work together to ensure our students have the resources they need to learn and succeed. This is no small task,” says Monroe County Executive Adam J. Bello. “Thanks to the support of our community partners we’re able to ensure that RCSD students will have reliable WiFi for the rest of the school year.”

The three organizations are working together to coordinate among other area philanthropies to support the purchase of additional WiFi hotspots for up to 2,000 more students. Monroe County

will also cover the \$32,000 monthly unlimited data charges for these devices for November and December.

Starting January 1, local funders are committed to contributing and raising additional resources to continue to pay the \$83,000 monthly charges for these new WiFi hotspots through summer school, which ends in August.

“The collaborative work being done in our community across public, private and nonprofit sectors to address the critical needs of families during this pandemic has been nothing short of inspiring,” says Ajamu Kitwana, vice president/director, community impact at ESL Federal Credit Union. “The collaboration between Monroe County and the City School District has motivated us to match the County’s funding as a show of deep support for that partnership.”

With ESL paying for two months of internet connectivity and GRHF and RACF committing to each pay for one month, that leaves four monthly bills not yet covered. To close that gap, ESL will match additional contributions to the effort, up to a total of \$475,000.

The issue of city households with little or no internet connections were highlighted in an April 15 report by ROC the Future on the digital divide in Rochester. The U.S. Census indicates that while 80 percent of Rochester residents have broadband access, 20 percent have no internet and 17 percent rely solely on their cellular phone’s data plan. This leaves 37 percent of city residents with limited functionality for educational purposes.

“Our hope is that other local funders, businesses, community organizations, and even individuals will be interested in joining us to support remote learning for our children,” says Simeon Banister, vice president for Community Programs at the Community Foundation.

There are indications that the City School District’s Pre-K students also may need better internet access at home, so additional resources may be needed, Banister added.

To take advantage of ESL’s matching offer, contributions can be made online to the COVID Education Fund at www.racf.org/COVIDEducation or mail checks to Rochester Area Community Foundation, 500 East Avenue, Rochester, NY 14607.

U.S. Senator Charles Schumer said, “Now more than ever, it is imperative that our students are provided with the resources they need for remote learning during the pandemic. Lack of reliable internet access should never be a barrier to academic success. With the use of CARES Act funding, that I was proud to secure, we can break down this barrier down and help keep Rochester City School District students up to speed and connected, so that no student falls behind.

“Far too many schools and families in New York don’t have access to necessary broadband services to keep students connected,” said Senator Gillibrand. “Students in Rochester and across New York State depend on fast internet and reliable Wi-Fi for effective online learning but the pandemic has exacerbated the digital divide and put students at even greater risk of falling behind. This CARES Act funding will ensure that the Rochester City School District (RCSD) can provide reliable high-speed broadband connectivity so that students are able to participate in remote learning. I will always fight to ensure every student has the resources to stay connected and receive the high-quality education they deserve.”

“Access to reliable internet is essential in today’s high-tech world, and it’s even more critical during the COVID-19 pandemic—but unfortunately, for too many families, it’s a luxury that remains out of reach,” said Congressman Joe Morelle. “Every student deserves the opportunity to succeed, and that’s why I’m proud to have helped secure funding through the CARES Act to ensure RCSD students have the tools they need to thrive. I’m grateful to County Executive Bello and all of our community partners who came together to help Rochester students receive a high-quality education despite the challenging circumstances we face.”

“It’s important that students are receiving the support and resources they need to get the education they deserve. This pandemic has allowed our community to work together creatively and collaboratively; I am so grateful to all of the organizations participating in this effort to cover connectivity costs for RCSD students,” added Monroe County Legislature Majority Leader Steve Brew.

“The pandemic is showing that highspeed internet is a crucial tool for children and families. I want to thank the County Executive and our philanthropic community for stepping up to fill a huge need,” said Monroe County Legislature Minority Leader Yversha Roman.

“Martin Luther King Jr said, ‘It’s all right to tell a man to lift himself by his own bootstraps, but it is cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps.’ It is cruel to expect our children in the city to be able to learn from home if they do not have access to free internet. I am glad that we are facing this issue head on, and providing the tools needed for our youth and their families to have a fighting chance. I pray that we eliminate the many redline issues in the city that prevent our most valuable from being able to have boots with straps,” said Monroe County Legislature Black and Asian Caucus Leader Ernest Flagler-Mitchell.

“County Executive Adam Bello acted quickly when we raised the issue of Mi-Fi devices currently used by students having data caps. It’s clear we need longer term solutions to bridging the digital divide and I look forward to working with the County Executive and our community partners,” concluded Monroe County Legislator Rachel Barnhart.