

Why Students Can't Get Laptops

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Highlight: A surge in worldwide demand for low-cost laptops has created shipment delays and pitted desperate schools against one another.

Body

A surge in worldwide demand for low-cost laptops has created shipment delays and pitted desperate schools against one another.

This is the Coronavirus Schools Briefing, a guide to the seismic changes in U.S. education that are taking place during the pandemic. Sign up here to get this newsletter in your inbox.

The laptop gap

Most students in the U.S. have been back to school for over a month. But many remote learners face a basic challenge: They don't have computers to attend online classes.

"Not everybody is financially stable enough to buy laptops," said Samantha Moore, whose four school-age kids took turns using an iPad provided by the school district in Guilford County, North Carolina, last year. "I can't just go out and buy four computers."

That shortage is not for lack of planning. This summer, Guilford spent more than \$27 million to order 66,000 computers and tablets for students. But the pandemic surge in demand for laptops has created monthslong shipment delays worldwide. Schools that waited to place orders — often because they were struggling to make ends meet — lost out to districts with deeper pockets.

"Schools could have built stockpiles ahead of time, but the underlying problem is gaps between the rich and poor, and between well-funded and poorly funded school districts," said our colleague Kellen Browning, in a conversation with our sister newsletter, On Tech With Shira Ovide.

"Schools with fewer resources face a double whammy because their students are less likely to have computers and internet access at home, and the districts tend to have less money to buy enough laptops for them."

The chief executive of Trox, a company that sells devices to school districts, said North American schools are likely to end this school year with a shortage of more than five million devices.

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In Guilford, more than 4,000 students in the district started the semester without computers. A teacher secured more tablets through his church for Ms. Moore's family, but neighboring families still struggle. To close the gap, Guilford might resume some in-person instruction in late October.

"It's heartbreaking," said Angie Henry, the district's chief operations officer. "The learning loss that's taken place since March when they left, when schools closed, it'll take years to catch up. This could impact an entire generation of our students."

Where to find laptops now: Our colleagues at Wirecutter report that it's still extremely difficult to find a decent Chromebook, an inexpensive type of laptop used by many schools. But you can find some tips here. Or, check in with Comp-U-Dopt, which refurbishes used computers and gives them to children in cities across the country.

Read More: It's not just K-12. Some college students, without laptops or Wi-Fi at home, are dropping out of schools to avoid failing outright.

Why families go remote

Classrooms have opened in New York City, but more than half of the school system's 1.1 million students have chosen all-remote learning, through at least November.

In District 26, a high-performing, predominantly immigrant school district in northeastern Queens, two out of three families have opted for all-remote learning — the highest rate in the city. The district is roughly half Asian-American, with many immigrant families from East and Southeast Asia.

Citywide, about seven out of 10 Asian-American students have opted out of in-person classes, a higher rate than any other ethnic group, according to the city's Department of Education.

Nearly half of Black and Latino families have also chosen all-remote education, compared with less than a third of white families.

Many parents in District 26 do not have schedule flexibility with their jobs. Some, like Gina Valmoria, want to minimize the interruptions.

"I remember how disruptive it was when class had to close down, and I wanted to avoid that for my kids," said Ms. Valmoria, who decided to enroll her 5- and 8-year-old kids in all-remote learning based off her experience as a student in Hong Kong during the SARS outbreak in 2003. Ms. Valmoria, who is Chinese-American, vividly remembers classes abruptly halting midsemester because of the contagion.

Others said they wanted to protect older relatives who live at home.

"While kids are safe, my mom is safe, too," said Margaret Li. Although she believed her two would benefit from in-person classes, her 68-year-old mother lives with the family.

"Her health is most important to our family," Ms. Li said.

Covid's new normal

Earlier this month, The Times started "Family, Interrupted," a new, weekly series about the "irritations, sorrows, panics and even small joys" of life during the pandemic.

Last week, we wrote about Carl and Jesse Crawford, who have chosen to home-school their six children.

"There are days where I feel like I have it all together, and then there's days where I am just like, the people are alive and in bed. Hey, that's a win. You have to laugh at yourself or you're going to cry to yourself. And honestly, I have done both, many, many times," Jesse said.

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Yesterday, we published an interview with the Ramirez family, who lost their father to the pandemic, a few months after their mother died.

"We're still quarantining," said Beatriz Ramirez, the oldest of four children. "We don't go out, we don't do anything. We're just doing remote learning,"

We'll be back with more from the series next week.

Around the country

College update

- Brigham Young University-Idaho said it is "deeply troubled" about reports that students are intentionally exposing themselves to the coronavirus in order to sell plasma that contains viral antibodies.
- The University of Florida has suspended football activities after at least 19 team members tested positive for the coronavirus.
- Historically Black colleges and universities will receive \$15 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation over three years to become testing hubs and expand screening.
- Out of 69 positive cases at Iona College, in New York's Westchester County, 64 trace back to one super spreader event. At least 98 percent of those infected are student-athletes.
- Ohio Wesleyan University has eliminated 18 majors and consolidated other programs to save \$4 million a year, The Columbus Dispatch reported. The college president said the college was re-examining its structure and operations during the pandemic.

K-12 update

- Gothamist reports that several large yeshivas in Borough Park, Brooklyn, have remained open in defiance of orders to shut down. The neighborhood is one of nine hot spots in New York City where public and private schools closed to contain a growing outbreak.
- At least 23 school district employees in Wichita, Kan., have recently tested positive for the coronavirus, including 12 who work at elementary schools.
- In Iowa, several districts now have mask mandates in place after the state relaxed its quarantine guidelines.
- The boom in parochial school enrollment has meant huge business for a school-uniform store in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, The New Yorker reports.

How's remote teaching going?

K-12 educators, raise your hands: We want to know how you have adapted your classroom practices to teach and engage students remotely.

We're also interested in learning about your biggest challenges in teaching via video. Are you seeing barriers to remote online learning, such as a lack of computers or access to high-speed internet services, among students?

Share your experiences and video lessons here. Thanks!

Sign up here to get the briefing by email.

Shira Ovide contributed to today's briefing.

PHOTO: Until recently, Raymond Heller, 13, shared one iPad with his three siblings. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Jeremy M. Lange for The New York Times FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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