

There's a Digital Divide in Silicon Valley and It's Leaving Students Behind

Despite living in the country's top tech hub, many students in Silicon Valley are struggling to get the internet access they need to learn—especially during COVID-19.

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Jessica Fregni
Writer-Editor, One Day

On the bottom of the crest of the East Side Union High School District are the words “Silicon Valley.”

The school district, located in Santa Clara County in San Jose, is just miles from the Googleplex and the other campuses of world famous tech companies. But living just outside of the heart of Silicon Valley are more than 15,000 families who lack access to high-speed internet and devices.

Lorena Chavez, a Bay Area '08 alumna and Teach For America staff member, is a trustee at East Side Union High School. In this role, she advocates for policies to end the digital divide in Santa Clara. She and other educators and elected officials have also joined together to form a Digital Equity Coalition to find long- and short-term solutions to this issue of internet access—a mission that has become even more urgent during the pandemic and the shift to remote learning.

This work is deeply personal for Chavez because it is rooted in the school district where she herself attended as a child, where she served as a middle school teacher and middle school principal, and where her two children now go to school in a feeder district. Chavez tells us what the digital divide has been like for students in Santa Clara County—both before and during COVID-19—and what she and her peers on the Digital Equity Coalition are doing to put an end to the broadband gap in Santa Clara County.



Lorena Chavez (Bay Area '08) is a Teach For America staff member and trustee at East Side Union High School.

Can you tell me about Santa Clara County and the families who live there?

The county is huge. We have 11 traditional public schools through the district, and we have about 11 public charter schools as well, and that's just in the East Side. East Side covers about half of San Jose. We're just a high school district, but we have seven feeder districts. It's a big part of the county.

In Santa Clara County, you have 31 districts. You have East Side, my district, and our feeder districts that have majority Latinx or Vietnamese students. But then you go to the city of Santa Clara, or even going towards the Mountain View area, you get a completely different population—more affluent, if you will. When you think about diversity in every sense of the word, it really is diverse.

I'm raising two little ones here in the East Side, going to one of our feeder district schools. This is where I'm choosing to put my children in for many reasons. We have pockets in Silicon Valley and in the East Side of San Jose that are high need, low income, but just so rich in culture and have so much to offer our community. The East Side of San Jose is a jewel in Silicon Valley. That is my family. I want my kids to be able to experience all of it. This is home for us. At the same time, I realize there is a huge academic gap in our community and that is not okay.

Right now, in Santa Clara County, there are 15,000 families or more without devices or internet access. How did this digital divide impact students even before COVID-19?

I'm glad you asked that question because sometimes people say, "Well, now there is a digital divide," and it's like, "Yes, I know. It's been existing."

My superintendent, he did a really good job of saying, "there is a digital divide," which he referred to as the homework gap. Given the huge gap, what our superintendent did was start really interrogating what this is about. Our kids can't do their homework. Why? Because they don't have access to being online. That is a problem.

He said, all East Side is going to have access to broadband infrastructure. We are going to start the East Side access community wireless project. What we're going to do is we're going to pass a bond.

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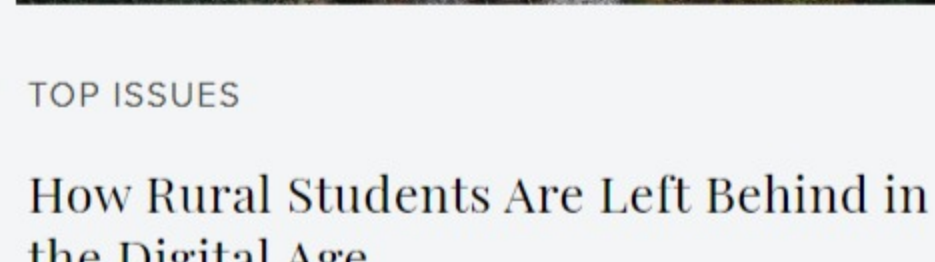
Lorena Chavez
Trustee, East Side Union High School
Bay Area '08

What happened then?

The bond passed, thank goodness. Our first school to get connected was James Lick High School. *[Editor note: This pilot project at James Lick High School provided free internet access to 1,700 students and approximately 6,000 households between 2017 and 2019, leading to growth in academic outcomes including increased graduation rate, SAT/ACT/State Assessment scores, and GPA.]* But it's not just the school. It's the whole community around it. Literally, you can turn on your computer and look for free WiFi East Side. If you're a student, you have your own line. If you're a community member, you have another line. It doesn't matter who you are, if you're a high school student, or if you're in kindergarten, or if you live in the same household. If you live in that area, you have access to it.

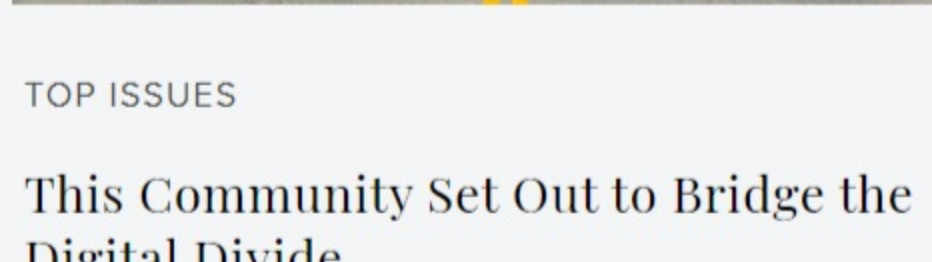
We want to cover about 70 percent of our district. Our whole district covers around 80,000 students. That includes the feeder districts who are going to be, again, having access to this, just because they're in our area. But in six years, not much had been done.

This is where our advocacy for the Digital Equity Coalition came into play, where we said we need more long term solutions. Why is it that in six years, only one school has been done? Where is the urgency? It's not until COVID hits and, wow, we have this big issue in our hands. Now, we have to deal with it, right?



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How is this impacting students now during this pandemic, which has left so many students relying on internet access for remote learning?

The divide that still exists within the East Side continues to be the connectivity.

We have hotspots, but some of our parents underestimated the need for that. One school, at a feeder district, said they needed 250 hotspots. Then come the first day of school, that turns into 500. Why? Because the amount of gigabytes that it takes to even just log on to Zoom, for example, and with all the kids in the household, their internet cannot handle that. They needed more.

Also, the issue with some of these hotspots too, I mean, it depends on what carrier goes into what areas. Some carriers just do not work in certain areas. That defies the purpose of even having a hotspot. Now, we have students that do not have a hotspot, they definitely don't have the regular internet broadband, and so they're stuck. You go down south county, south part of the county in the Morgan Hill-Gilroy area, it's worse.

How so?

I had one student, I was his principal a few years ago. He's now in high school. He had to go to a McDonald's to do his homework, because that's the only place where he can connect. They couldn't connect in his house. He lives behind in one of those small houses because they take care of a farm. Thank goodness, they were able to get a hotspot that works for him.

South County is an area that is really struggling with connectivity and what kind of infrastructure needs to happen in those places, so people get access. I know there's some research being done right now. Some of our officials are looking into that. Meanwhile, that's at least a year of learning lost for a number of our kids.

Can you share any examples of students or parents struggling to get connected for school during this COVID-19 pandemic?

We have parents who literally can't even turn on Wi-Fi, they don't have the technical skill.

I had a parent liaison in my district who was on the phone with a mom for at least an hour every day for two weeks, trying to guide the mom through it. At the end of the month, she was like, "I cannot do this, I have to work. I don't have time. I can't be spending an hour with you every day trying to figure this out. I'm done. My kid's just not going to go to school."

You mentioned that you're a member of the Digital Equity Coalition. Can you tell me about the Digital Equity Coalition and how it started?

We're all really good friends. We had been already working for some time on different issues, and then COVID hit. We said we need to do something. We're all very connected with different layers of government in the area or at the state. We started engaging with people. We said, "You know what? Let's write a letter to everyone across the layers and let's see what happens."

We got a response from the county board of supervisors and from the city of San Jose. After we started engaging, they ended up doing a number of different things. Initiatives with the library, with East Side Access, and other grants. It was awesome, and they're still doing that. It all started from that advocacy and that initiative. With the county, we ended up getting \$7.1 million, which is awesome. With the city of San Jose, \$3.4 million.

We think that this is just the beginning. We are working on [figuring out what is next](#).

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Lorena Chavez
Trustee, East Side Union High School
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How is this digital divide exacerbating existing racial and economic disparities in Santa Clara County?

I'll use an example of a family who lived in a really poor neighborhood in our district, in the East Side, hardest hit by COVID. They were not able to pick up a device for their children until three weeks into school. Why? Because they had been working, they were tired. They had to ask for time off to come to school.

The reason that they came was having the school knock on their door and saying, "Your kid needs to go to school, you need to pick up the device, you need to pick up the device. You need to come in, so that we can show you how to navigate a device."

You have single parents trying to figure it out alone, you have parents with a lot of kids trying to figure it out, with limited resources and having to work 24/7 to survive. It's hard for them to be home, they'll leave the kids with the neighbor, whoever, maybe the older child, trying to figure things out because what matters to them is that they could put a roof over their kids, and rightfully so. It's survival first. Whereas they once had school to at least support them and really engage their kids throughout the day, they no longer have that.

If you go just a mile down, depending which way you go, it could be a different world. You have families with pods, you have tutors, you have really great Wi-Fi, you have all the devices, you have all the extra stuff that kids are doing or can have access to. There's different worlds, all within Silicon Valley.

Lastly, what would be possible for students in Santa Clara County if every child had access to reliable high-speed internet and connected devices?

I try to stay as optimistic as possible. But for me, when I think about this, I'm like, "This is the baseline."

Every kid having access to a device and connectivity means having a seat in the classroom. Then that's when we could start thinking about what it means to support our students virtually and making sure our teachers and our educators have what they need that our students can truly be successful and eliminate this educational inequity.

I will say this, too. From my teacher friends all over the place—some work in wealthier districts than others—this is the same feedback that I've gotten: Some of their most disengaged students are now engaged all of a sudden. Some of their once really engaged students are now disengaged.

This is really an opportunity to rethink education and how we can set it up to really get to all of our kids. It's going to be different once we get this vaccine. I think we're going to be teaching and learning a lot different, which is really exciting because it means opportunities to rethink education.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

