Cox Highlights Efforts to Expand Internet Connectivity

There are efforts on numerous fronts to ensure that as the coronavirus pandemic continues, all students and teachers are able to access high-speed Internet to engage in distance education, speakers said today at an online event hosted by Cox Communication, Inc.

The event included Cox announcing a pledge to commit $60 million over the next year to help close the digital divide.

Internet connectivity is “more important than ever before,” Cox President Pat Esser said, adding: “I can’t think of anything more important than ensuring this learning connection for our kids gets our attention at this time. ... It’s not just about getting homework done anymore. It’s about giving our kids the ability to show up, to participate.”

Cox has been working to make sure its network is up to the task of dealing with increased demand during the pandemic, as well as help “those with the greatest needs” get access to the Internet, Mr. Esser said.

The company has seen the equivalent of two years-worth of Internet traffic growth in the past five months, he said.

“Our industry is performing extremely well, even with the increased use,” Mr. Esser said.

The company has made “great strides” in helping close the digital divide during the pandemic, he said, noting that Cox launched its “Connect2Compete” program, which offers service at a “heavily discounted” rate of $9.95 per month.

Cox is also eager to work with school districts on its “Cox CARES Act Solutions for Education” program to “fast track” efforts to expand Internet connectivity, he said. The program has been used by “hundreds” of schools, so far, Mr. Esser said.

“It’s not a one-size-fits-all solution,” he said. “We have to be able to adapt community by community to help our schools accomplish what they’re trying to achieve.”

Among other things, Cox has made its public Wi-Fi hotspots available at no cost, offered two free months of Internet service, and boosted its Internet speeds, Mr. Esser said. The company plans to continue those offerings through the end of June 2021, he said.
Cox Vice president-business sales Ashley Perkins said the company has been working diligently to address connectivity gaps for students and educators, tailored to deal with their individual situations.

“Our schools need more than a one-size-fits-all approach to connectivity,” she said.

The Solutions for Education program was created to streamline the process for school districts to obtain discounted Internet service for their students using funds provided by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Ms. Perkins said.

“I urge our school districts to reach out to us,” she said. “We’re ready to work with you to get your students connected.”

NCTA President Chief Executive Officer Michael Powell called closing the digital divide a "monumental" challenge that has been made even more daunting by the pandemic.

Though distance learning is “not ideal,” facilitating Internet connectivity is a “critical and indispensable part of the public health effort to get the disease under control,” Mr. Powell said.

The cable industry is “committed to doing everything we can to help our kids continue their education,” he said.

The cable industry and Education Superhighway launched the “K-12 Bridge to Broadband” program earlier this month, he noted, in which companies work with school districts to identify low-income students that lack Internet service, and then enable schools to pay for that service at a discounted rate.

“I’m often asked, ‘Can we really close the digital divide?’” he said. “Well, of course we can. But it will take a community of partners, it will take an immense amount of hard work, serious, long-lasting commitment, and a lot of resources.”

Common Sense Media CEO James Steyer agreed with others at the event the coronavirus pandemic has “exacerbated” the inequities of the digital divide.

“The digital divide is this incredibly important issue in our society,” he said. “At the end of the day, it’s about a digital learning gap for kids in this country. ... Every child in this country deserves a chance for a good education. We cannot have a situation where there are two Americas and two educational systems, where [only] certain kids have access and can go to school.”

According to Common Cause research, there are 16 million K-12 students in the country — about 30% of the student population — who do not have access to either Internet connectivity or a connected device, he said. Of that total, there are 9 million students who lack both, Mr. Steyer said.

Students in rural areas, as well as students of color, are disproportionately affected by the problem, he said.

“It is a fairly disturbing picture if you care a lot about kids and the state of education in this country,” Mr. Steyer said, adding: “It’s absolutely imperative that we close the digital divide. It’s a no-brainer. It’s economically the right thing to do. And it’s morally the right thing to do.”
In addition, he said, there are approximately 300,000 to 400,000 teachers who do not have access to adequate broadband connections.

“We can solve this as a country,” Mr. Steyers said. “And it’s going to take a team effort.”

As part of its contribution to try to solve the problem, Mr. Steyer said, Common Sense launched its “Connect All Students” campaign to advocate to policymakers, school districts, and others the importance of closing the digital divide.

In addition, Common Cause has been offering its “Wide Open School” initiative, which provides online learning materials, he said.

Clark County (Nevada) School District Superintendent Jesus Jara said the pandemic had “put a magnifying glass” on inequities that exist regarding Internet connectivity.

That is particularly the case in Clark County, a district that includes Las Vegas and in which about 70% of children live at or below the poverty level, he said.

The district has been in a “triage” situation since the start of the pandemic, and has been helped by working with Cox, he said. —Jeff Williams

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