

“While it can be difficult to view the current situation with anything beyond anxiety and apprehension, we believe the wide-reaching consequences of this moment present a tremendous opportunity to transform education to serve all students, especially students who have traditionally been furthest from opportunity.”

– New Mexico Public Education Deputy Secretary Kara Bobroff



Awareness of the Structural Inequities of Distance Learning

Since the announcement in mid-March of the closure of schools because of the COVID-19 global pandemic, there have been a variety of communications at all levels in our education system around the inequities of online or distance learning for our New Mexican students. We at Environmental Education of NM (EENM-eenm.org) have been in conversations with our broad community of outdoor and environmental educators to ensure that we are promoting and supporting opportunities that support all New Mexican students, including through offering alternatives to learning that do not require online or distance learning. This is in support of our movement to provide equitable daily access to the outdoors and environmental learning for every student.

New Mexico Public Education Secretary Ryan Stewart stated in March, “We know there are vast inequities around who does have access to hardware, broadband and the software and who doesn’t. What we don’t want to do in making any of these decisions is exacerbate the opportunity gaps that exist between those who have access to those devices and those who don’t. We do not recommend that districts move forward with online learning if it’s going to leave some students out of the educational process.” EENM has been working with a variety of organizations and teachers to explore alternatives to online learning to reach the broadest number of New Mexican students during these unprecedented times. This piece is to provide clarification as to why providing learning only through online or distance learning can lead to the unintended consequences of creating a larger academic gap for our more vulnerable, less resourced students.

Internet Access

According to 2018 U.S. Census Data, over 20% of New Mexican households do not have internet access, compared to a national average of 15%, making New Mexico one of the lowest ranking states in internet access. When sorting the data into households with different income levels, more inequities surface. For example, 44% of households with annual income levels <\$20,000 do not have internet access whereas only 8% of households with annual income levels >\$75,000 do not have internet access. Considering that a significant percentage of New Mexican students (over 60%) qualify for free or reduced lunch, **it is vital to be aware that close to half of lower income households in New Mexico do not have internet access.** In a state with such a large geographic area and lower population density, providing internet access to all households, especially those in rural areas, is a costly proposition.

Devices

On a national level, about 8% of households do not have a computer and this number increases to 12% for New Mexican households (U.S. 2018 Census data). Even in households that have a computer and internet access available, what if there is a parent telecommuting that needs that device to be able to earn an income right now? How can families that have one computer and one or both parents working from a home with multiple children reasonably schedule time for distance learning on that one device?

Responsible Use of Technology

When internet access and devices for meaningful online learning can be provided, it's crucial that students are supported in understanding responsible and safe use of technology. It takes time, thoughtful planning, and supported learning for our students to understand how to use technology in ways that are responsible and safe.

Other Considerations

In addition to the logistics of internet and device access and supporting responsible use of technology, there are other things to recognize and examine in supporting our students and families during “stay at home” orders. For example, many families have parents and other family members under a great deal of stress due to factors such as working additional hours because of being classified as an “essential worker” or job/financial loss. Families, including parents/guardians, did not plan to be home 24 hours a day and there are mental, emotional, and physical costs to these new ways of being. Many families are needing to invest even more time and resources in ensuring basic needs like food, shelter, and healthcare are being met for all family members. Additionally, teachers and educators have training and expertise to support different ways of learning and parents/guardians should not be expected to have these same skill sets. When designing supportive experiences and learning opportunities for students during the COVID-19 global pandemic, there are a variety of resources educators can look to and EENM has found the following particularly helpful:

<http://stemteachingtools.org/assets/landscapes/Guidance-for-Supporting-Science-Learning-During-COVID-19-School-Closures.pdf>.

Moving Forward

Supporting our students and families during this COVID-19 global pandemic will require new and multiple approaches. While exploring increasing internet and device access for all students, this is a time for the non-formal education community to also innovate new ways of supporting New Mexico students. **Because outdoor and environmental educators are intrinsically problem solvers and systems thinkers, we believe our community of educators is uniquely positioned to innovate new solutions to support our students and families during this time, especially those where distance and online learning would not benefit.**

EENM enthusiastically supports the “**Statewide Grab & Go STEM Activity project**” organized by NM MESA, Wild Friends/UNM Law, BEMP, and Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District as an incredible collaboration of educational partners supporting a new way of reaching students with STEM learning during this time. Over 12 partners including NM MESA, Wild Friends/UNM Law, BEMP, Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District, Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority, Nature Matters Academy, NMSU’s STEM Outreach Center, Talking Talons Youth leadership, Bosque School Math Department, Desert Oasis Teaching Garden at Albuquerque Academy, UNM school of Engineering, Cottonwood Gulch Expeditions, and others have come together to coordinate biweekly distribution of STEM learning materials, in English and Spanish, through grab and go meals on a statewide level.



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