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Even before federal COVID-19 rescue checks arrive, Illinois schools spend tens of millions on technology

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A young boy participates in an online lesson for his kindergarten class while schools remain closed to help slow the spread of COVID-19, Chicago, Illinois, April 3, 2020.

Illinois school leaders spent tens of millions of dollars within weeks as they scrambled to respond to the coronavirus outbreak and the abrupt school closures it triggered.

In a bid to roll out remote learning plans quickly, officials made rapid-fire buys even before the federal government promised \$678 million in emergency aid for Illinois schools. In some of the largest school districts across the state, the bulk of the spending went toward thousands of laptops and tablets.

But the robust purchases still fall short of supplying all students with the computers and reliable internet they need to learn at home, underscoring the depth of the digital divide facing low-income families. Officials are only just beginning to track whether all this new equipment is paying off in more students logging in and learning, with fewer than two-thirds of high schoolers participating in remote learning in Peoria. Chicago Public Schools, the state's largest district, still hasn't provided a districtwide tally for how many students engage in school work at all.

Other critical questions loom: How far will the federal emergency funds stretch to cover district costs? How aggressively should districts spend to rein in the pandemic's damage to their most vulnerable students and to prepare for the unpredictable months ahead?

Parents and others are calling on districts to be more transparent about their spending decisions and enlist public input.

"No one has a playbook on how to navigate this," said Jianan Shi of the parent group Raise Your Hand for Illinois Public Education, part of a coalition pressing Chicago district officials to include families in spending decisions. "We expect the district to be in partnership with its families for the solutions."

Chalkbeat and the Better Government Association surveyed five of Illinois' largest school districts about their expenditures tied to the crisis: Chicago, Rockford School District 205,

Springfield School District 186, **Elgin School District U-46**, and Peoria School District 150. Springfield did not provide a list of expenses.

Chicago said this week it could provide estimated expenditures only through April 10. Asked to provide public records of technology purchases and contracts, the district referred Chalkbeat to a school board document authorizing expenditures up to \$75 million during the crisis without board approval.

Illinois district administrators said they don't know when they'll receive federal dollars earmarked for their schools, what specific expenditures will be covered, or how much of the money they will have to pass on to charter and private schools.

The federal aid the five districts expect to receive amounts to less than 4% of their combined annual budgets.

"The federal money at this juncture won't be enough, particularly in communities that are low income," said Ralph Martire of the Chicago-based Center for Budget and Tax Accountability.

TECHNOLOGY PURCHASES

When the coronavirus outbreak closed the state's schools in March, the districts Chalkbeat and the BGA surveyed were in very different spots in terms of their technology inventories.

Chicago lagged other districts. A year before the pandemic, schools chief Janice Jackson set a goal to equip each of its more than 300,000 students in district-run schools with a computer by 2024. When COVID-19 hit, about 115,000 students still needed a device, by a district estimate.

Since March, the district has bought 53,000 Chromebooks, iPads and laptops — an initial purchase worth \$13.8 million followed by a more recent buy — to add to 65,000 devices it had in stock. Two months since schools closed, it has handed out roughly 100,000 of those devices.

Elgin U-46, which has an enrollment of 39,000, was in the midst of rolling out a plan to equip each student with a laptop and had just purchased 1,100 iPads for preschoolers before the pandemic hit. The district spent another \$1 million beefing up its inventory of Chromebooks when the governor announced school closures.

"Right out the gate, we placed an order for as many Chromebooks as we could get our hands on because we did not have a device for every family," Elgin Superintendent Tony Sanders said.

In Rockford, School District 205 had enough Chromebooks for everyone who needed one from third through 12th grade. But administrators had a logistical problem: Some schools had a surplus of computers while others didn't have enough. In the end, the district deployed 15,000 Chromebooks from its stockpile and bought an additional 16,000 devices. With the new purchases, the district has roughly one device for each of its nearly 29,000 students.

Superintendent Ehren Jarrett said the district is taking a risk because he doesn't know if the emergency federal funds will cover the device purchases, but he felt spending the money quickly was necessary.

“We are hopeful that these dollars will flow through — we certainly need them — but we didn’t want to wait or hesitate to meet the needs of our students,” Jarrett said.

INTERNET ACCESS

Devices are just a start. For districts, ensuring students have reliable access to the internet has proved a more daunting task. Elgin officials briefly considered equipping school buses with Wi-Fi and parking them in high-need neighborhoods, but quickly realized the signal wouldn’t be strong enough.

Other districts studied taking advantage of the publicly accessible Wi-Fi locations that dot their cities. But they stopped short of encouraging families to leave their homes while a stay-at-home order was in effect. Some districts purchased hot-spot devices for some students, but those are expensive and now largely out of stock amid high demand.



A parent picks up a loaner Chromebook outside Richardson Middle School on the Southwest Side of Chicago in April.

In the end, many districts leaned heavily on steering families to low-cost internet programs from Comcast and other providers. That approach has drawn concerns because the fine print on the deal can prevent some families from signing up.

Recently, some districts have tried to remove those barriers, as elected officials and civic groups press internet providers to expand their services to establish Wi-Fi “super spots” in high-need communities.

Elgin agreed to pick up the monthly Comcast bill for about 100 low-income families. Last week, Rockford’s school board made a similar decision, agreeing to spend up to \$39,800 to connect students to a Comcast plan costing each about \$10 per month after two free months. Rockford estimates about 1,000 of its nearly 29,000 students don’t have reliable internet service.

“The Comcast (plan) is really our stopgap until we get to the next digital learning, remote learning plan going forward,” said Jason Barthel, Rockford’s executive director of technology, at an April board meeting.

In Peoria, where roughly 70% of the school district’s 13,000 students are low income, the district formed a “connectivity committee” that called Comcast on behalf of families who could not sign up for the company’s low-cost plan because of issues outside their control. For example, some families lived in apartments where previous tenants hadn’t paid their bills. The district also spent \$108,000 on 200 hot-spot devices with unlimited data plans for a year.

Chicago spent \$2.6 million on 12,000 hot-spot devices for students who lack secure housing. But with an estimated one out of five Chicago children under 18 living in a home without broadband, officials have said securing internet access for all students who need it is too costly and have pointed families to Comcast's plan.

The Chicago Teachers Union calls that response a "cop-out," saying the district must look for "creative solutions" to get more students connected. It has also criticized the district's device rollout as uneven.

"The claim is that black children matter," said Stacy Davis Gates, the union's vice president. "Brown children matter. Homeless children matter. But the reality is that many of these children still don't have devices and broadband access."

PARTICIPATION RATES

As remote learning has become the reality for the rest of the spring and possibly into the fall, districts are stepping up efforts to track how many students are participating and to encourage more to log on.

But participation data so far has lagged. One reason is that the state left it up to individual districts to define and track student engagement. Getting a full picture of how many students are attending remote classes, turning in assignments, or connecting with teachers in some way, and then comparing that data district-to-district may prove difficult.

Chicago officials have said they are starting to track attendance by campus, but unlike some other large urban districts they have not yet released any numbers.

Rockford officials said they started tracking in April the number of students who completed assignments or asked for feedback, but the district said it will not have full data until the end of this week.

Other districts said they believe their investments in technology, plus phone calls, mailers, and other types of dedicated outreach, are improving student engagement.

In Peoria, district officials said high school participation rates rose to 60% in mid-April, from 54% at the beginning of the month. In all grades, participation rates averaged roughly 70%.

"We feel that we have done a good job at reaching our kids while obviously demonstrating room for improvement," said Thomas Bruch, Peoria Public Schools spokesman.

In Elgin, the district said overall attendance improved from 80% in late March to 85% in late April, though students who qualify for subsidized lunch — a measure of poverty — lag markedly behind their peers.

While technology represents the bulk of emergency spending — about 80% for Chicago, Peoria and Rockford combined — districts are also paying for other urgent needs. Among them are pay and protective equipment for workers who hand out meals and devices to families outside of schools.

Chicago is paying its front-line staff, such as janitors and nutrition workers, a 50% premium to work while schools are closed. By mid-April, that cost had added up to about \$2.5 million.

LOOKING AHEAD

Some critics say with federal help on the way, districts must spend more aggressively to keep vulnerable students from falling behind — and that spending plans should go beyond technology. Others urge leaders to take a more conservative approach, worrying the federal dollars will cover limited expenses and won't avert budget shortfalls amid declining state revenue.

The feds haven't spelled out which expenses they will cover, and Martire of the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability points to numerous gray areas, such as the premium pay for staff, that may or may not be reimbursed.

The full impact of the pandemic on the Illinois economy and state coffers is still hard to predict. This week, a Chicago coalition of parents and advocacy groups urged state leaders not to cut school funding and fill the gap with the federal dollars. The groups also called for steering federal emergency dollars toward the state's most vulnerable students, including those from low-income families and those with disabilities.

With Gov. J.B. Pritzker forecasting the state could fall \$6.2 billion short from now through June 2021 compared with his pre-COVID spending plans, some districts are already bracing for tough budgetary times and belt-tightening. Elgin froze hiring for positions not deemed critical. In Rockford, the district is projecting revenue shortfalls from \$10 million to \$19 million next school year.

"We are prepared to use a combination of any of these federal dollars as well as the reserves to avoid having to cut back significantly on staff and buy some time," said Jarrett, Rockford's superintendent.

In Chicago, leaders sounded more optimistic and said they planned to spend nearly 5% more on schools next year. They did not explain how the federal dollars will figure in next year's budget, but Jackson said at an April board meeting that the district will present a spending plan in coming weeks. As of mid-April, the district had spent the equivalent of 10% of its anticipated federal funds.

The Chicago Teachers Union said the district is missing an opportunity to attack longstanding inequities. Union leaders think the district needs to invest more in services for students with special needs and for English learners, and hire more social workers and nurses to address trauma in the fall.

School board members, who in March granted district leaders permission to spend as much as \$75 million without prior authorization, urged the district to keep anticipated budget pressures in mind.

"Those unknowns will impact our budget," board member Lucino Sotelo said. "We have to make sure we are responsible stewards."

Still, some advocates say that the pandemic could provide an opening to rethink how schools reach disadvantaged students and how Illinois invests in their education.

"While there are many challenges presented by the COVID-19 crisis," the Chicago coalition of civic groups wrote to the state, "this is also an opportunity to support innovations in education to support our most vulnerable students."