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WEBINAR

WHAT HAS COVID-19 TAUGHT US ABOUT THE DIGITAL AND OPPORTUNITY DIVIDES IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS?

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P R O C E E D I N G S

DR. TURNER LEE: Good afternoon, everyone, I am Nicol Turner Lee. I'm a senior fellow in Governance Studies, as well as the director of the Center for Technology Innovation at the Brookings Institution. And I'm so glad that you decided to join us on this day as we have a very important conversation. As many of you are also aware, that we have some certainty in our elections results, and I think that that has — progress has been made, but there is still obviously more work to do in the certification of those ballots. But one thing for sure that we know in the certainty of those election results is perhaps we'll have some certainty in policy. And one area that over the last seven months I've been particularly concerned about as a scholar at Brookings is school reopening and the extent to which we are actually tackling the digital divide, which is leaving millions of young people on the other side of digital opportunity.

Today I am so glad to be joined by a combination of experts. And we have had a series of these conversations here at Brookings on school reopening and the digital divide for that matter. But today is quite special and I think it is quite pertinent to the certainty that we actually have after the election, and that is what do we do now. We know for a fact that out of the 50 million public school students who were sent home almost seven to eight months ago, 15 to 16 million of them did not have broadband access at home or an internet device. And we know from the data from common sense media that about nine million of those kids did not have an internet device or home broadband access. We now know that the majority of those kids that are affected are disproportionately students of color, they are rural residents, they are also English learners, and they are kids who sit on the wrong side of digital opportunity.

Let me just break that down for a moment. These students are so vulnerable right now that there is the discussion around learning loss if they are not connected in any way to any type of learning going forward. And, finally, I would say that we're no longer just talking about digital divide, folks, we're talking about an achievement divide. My thought is that if we don't get this right, the future of industries will be impacted because our kids will not be prepared to learn.

I am a parent of a 14-year-old, and trust me, I'm learning that sometimes I don't do a good job parenting at home. And part of what this discussion is about, who needs to be at the table, what

is the all hands-on deck strategy. And for those of you who have heard me talk across the country on this issue, that's what I'm hearing from folks, what do we do next, particularly when many of the benefits that brought hot spots and devices that came through the CARES Act are set to expire at the end of the year.

So, with that, I want to just introduce the panelists that we have with us today. I'm excited about their presence, that they took time out of their busy schedule, particularly those that are working very hard to ensure equity across these spheres generally, and more specifically in education.

I don't know what order you're seeing them, so I'm not even going to say to the left or to the right, I'm just going to say their names. But I'm actually happy to be joined by Danna Diaz, superintendent of the Reynolds School District in Oregon. Waive your hand. I'm happy to be joined by John Palfrey, who is the president of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in Chicago. Mayor McKinley Price, who is the mayor of Newport News, Virginia and the president of the African American Mayors Association, Superintendent Leslie Torres-Rodriguez, who is the superintendent of the Hartford Public Schools, which by the way I visited for my book that is coming out in the spring on the U.S. digital divide, and my colleague, Jon Valant, who is a senior fellow at the Brown Center for Education Policy at Brookings.

Before I jump into my first question, I want to remind everybody, if you have a question please send it to events@Brookings.edu and follow us on Twitter at #DigitalSchools. events@Brookings.edu and follow us on Twitter at #DigitalSchools.

So I want to jump into the two educators first. I want to jump into your job. You all are both sheroes in many respects because the work that you have been doing in the last seven months has been incredibly front line and incredibly amazing to keep our systems working.

Superintendent Diaz, let me start with you first. We're seeing school districts and local districts, bigger school districts and local schools, continue to struggle when it comes to connecting students to learning, especially students and families of color. You have a predominantly Latino body. I would love to hear a little bit more, and then I'm going to run over to Superintendent Torres-Rodriguez, on what it has been like as an educational administrator coping with this public health and institutional restrictions of COVID-19. Let's start there first.

MS. DIAZ: Thank you. I want to first thank you for the opportunity to be here today. And

I would like to tell you that I never thought that I would serve during a pandemic and also during wildfires.

In these unprecedented times, we quickly had to become an internet service provider, we also had to partner with our local public health authority for guidance and learn what kind of air filters our school buildings needed and what they have installed.

First, I would like to thank our amazing students, families, certificated, and classified staff that I serve. In March, we had to get in and build a plane while we were flying. We learned about how the digital divide was very real within our district. We had recently secured technology devices for all of our secondary students, yet we found we had a gap with our elementary students. We started to order devices in the spring and summer to ensure we closed that gap. We also learned that our families had to adjust to learn how to use technology and our learning management systems. We partnered with our language liaisons to provide translation and interpreter services to provide support with families.

We had to learn many lessons learned over this time. We used Schoology and learned very quickly that it was not a user-friendly tool for our elementary students and parents. And this fall we were able to pivot and order more technology, hot spots, supplemental materials, as well as order an elementary learning management system that teachers and students are now using with fidelity. That system is called Seesaw.

We are providing professional development right now for our staff and we had to push back the start of school for two weeks due to the wildfires. Yes, wildfires during COVID-19 as we were one of the many districts and communities in Oregon impacted by the wild fires. And we pivoted and we are now in comprehensive distance learning until January 29.

In the spring, I had created a reopening task force and we meet quarterly. They have offered us direction and I am grateful for their expertise and sharing of their experience. This fall I created a parent advisory committee and they have presented insight on services they would like to see improved in our district, such as meal services, technology, how to view videos in other languages, and classwork load concerns, just to name a few.

DR. TURNER LEE: I'm sitting here taking notes. I apologize for my delay, because I've been watching this since the day and the minute that schools closed, and it's so interesting, as you said, that hit me the most, schools — you have become an internet service provider.

And, Superintendent Torres-Rodriguez, I've read your stuff. I mean Hartford, as I realize when I went there for my book, was already dealing with connectivity challenges in the city, right. And so, there was already an existing digital divide. I believe you were one of the first cities where I read that students had to walk to local, you know, fast food places just to get internet access in order to get online to complete their homework.

What are you finding as well? Please share with us these similar experiences and, in your case, predominantly Latino, but a city, right, you're in the urban core of an eastern city.

MS. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ: Yes. And so, glad to be here with everyone.

And, you know, first of all we know so much more now than we did back in March. So I want to acknowledge that, along with the hard work that everyone has done not only in our school system, but through outer community. We are what I call an asset rich city. Our community based organizations have been working diligently with us throughout the challenge that we have in front of us.

And, you know, back in March we were not a one-to-one district. We are getting there now. But I did say — I remember saying we're going to close schools, let's figure out first how to feed our students when they're not in school. We're not going to make an announcement until we have our complete operation up and running to make sure our families can have their meals and also let's try to identify how we can get our student devices. We only had half of our — the needed devices, right, 10,000 out of the 19,000 that we needed.

So we did as much as we could to get everything out, devices that were in good shape, others that were missing keys, but regardless, let's get everything out. We're in a better place now with 94% of our students having access to a device. But we know that the access to the device and the hot spots is just, you know, a few steps forward.

I, quite frankly, would be disingenuous if I told you that I have a plan post COVID for maintaining any type of blended learning model. I do not have a strategy, I don't have a refresh plan, I do not know yet when all 100% of my students are going to have access to reliable internet.

And so, like Superintendent Diaz referenced, we too had to develop plans. We actually, per state requirement, had to develop three plans, an in-person plan, a remote plan, a hybrid — you name it. And we tried to develop operating procedures for all of those. We were very committed, and still

are, to providing an in person learning option, to the extent that it was safely, you know, possible.

We started with that option and we have about 17,000 of our students that are in-person every day. We are going to have a pivot a week from now, given the external health conditions. But we have learned that while we have to tend to the hardware and making sure that we secure that, that we have to — you know, there's a divide also with our families, our caregivers' ability, right, to support students with their learning for those that are remote. And so, it is not just about ensuring that we have reliable access — that's key — then it's also how do we support our families and our students and to sustain that?

DR. TURNER LEE: I mean, for both of the superintendents, before I go to over to the mayor, are there challenges in particular with the Latino student population? I went, as part of my book, to West Phoenix, Arizona, which is in Maricopa County, and, surprisingly, 90% of the kids had actually cell phones. But they were not for the reasons that I thought. They had them because of fear of deportation of the parents and a way to get in touch with the family just in case things went awry.

What about during this transition of broadband access? Because I think we, as policy makers, we see the statistics, but can you humanize for us just for a moment, and then we'll move on in the conversation, how that's impacting your Latino families?

And I'll start with you, Superintendent Diaz, and then we'll go to Superintendent Torres-Rodriguez.

MS. DIAZ: Well, I think what's important is that we have families that work. Some of them have two to three jobs and they have to leave their children at home to do the work. And most of the information is in English and if they're not competent in the English language, they're going to depend on their children to help them with the interpretation of the work. Especially just recently when I had the parent advisory committee meeting, one of my parents was mentioning a mom who speaks Swahili and she works two jobs and she's got to come home and help her children too. So it's not — it's everyone, it's our students of color, our parents of color that have to go to work and have to leave their children to do the work, school work. And then if they don't understand and they don't — they may understand the English language, but they may not read the English language, how are they going to support their children at home?

So that's where we're at right now, trying to provide videos in their native language so that they can support their children at home. And then at the same time, trying to find resources in our community with our community based organizations so that they can also support our students as well.

So we have a number of partners that also support our families. But it's been challenging and it's not been easy. I mean even using Zoom. Some of our parents love using Google and so we had to pivot and change. Instead of using — we used Microsoft Teams, but we also have to give access to Zoom. And making sure we have a repertoire of online resources so that our families feel comfortable using them for their children.

DR. TURNER LEE: Wow. Superintendent Torres-Rodriguez?

MS. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ: Yes. So, you know, one of our recent data points shows that our Latino, Latina, and Latinx students are the lowest in terms of showing up, whether it is in person or remote, right. They have the lowest attendance rates, and, across all the subgroups, are English learners, which before COVID, right, were a group that we were trying to lean in and trying to understand how it is that we're going to provide additional supports to. And that is to what Superintend Diaz has referenced, that is the feedback that we have gotten in our surveys from our caregivers and our families that they have all the other priorities that they are competing with. And, you know, I've had families that have said to me, “If I do not go to work I will lose by job and I will be homeless again.” Conversations that we were having in the spring.

And so, it is a challenge to make sure that we provide our families, not in the expected modality that we already do, which is your typical 8 a.m.-3 p.m. opportunities for our parents to learn how to support their student. So our CBOs, our community based organizations, are key to our supporting our families and our students.

DR. TURNER LEE: Yeah, you know, what you said is so — I was on a panel just the other day and this particular person was a teacher out of a rural area — I think it was in West Virginia or someplace like that, and he made this comment that has haunted me all weekend, which is we have students that we will never see. And we did — like you said, we didn't see them before and now they have like disappeared, temporarily disappeared, and we're trying our best to recover them.

Mayor Price, you are a mayor. Newport News is a mixed community in terms of rural,

urban, where you sit in Virginia. You're sort of shelled around a host of other systemic inequalities as well.

As a mayor, where do you see this digital divide either growing or being addressed as we actually navigate through the pandemic, as well as think about what's for the future, because achievement gaps matter, particularly among kids of color?

MR. PRICE: Absolutely, Nicol, and thank you for this opportunity to share. And my heart goes out to the two superintendents who are on this panel, and all superintendents, because we know what school divisions are going through.

This epidemic, as has been stated, has just shown us what the discrepancies are between our communities. We are about 44% minority by population, but about 54% minority in public schools. And we're just seeing now — you know, we had to bring in the libraries, the schools, to try and makeshift all of these devices that are needed for kids to learn and to adapt. And I think the thing that we're going to see once we do come out of this, is that we're — as has been said — we're going to lose students that will never return. I think homeschooling is going to be now those parents who have found a way to make this work are going to probably stay with it until we see that they feel absolutely that it is safe to go back to school. I think, for me, though, one of the reassuring things is that I think with the new administration, we're going to have some national policies that are going to be instituted or we're just never going to get out of this.

We all are in this together. We can't do it by community, by community, it has to be a national push. It has to be partnerships with the technology. We are beyond the fact that Wi-Fi is no longer something that we cannot afford, it has to be a part of our communities. And we've got to find a way to make that a permanent part, Wi-Fi and the technology needed, to continue for our students, especially those students who are already behind, who are already suffering with social inequities. You've got parents that are not only trying to find two and three jobs, but parents who are right now going to be evicted when this thing ends, they're worried about they're behind in their utilities. It's a complex matter for parents who are poor right now with their children. It's something we really are going to have to address on a national cause. We need money to do that and we need money that comes directly to cities that are most affected, not money that just goes to populations of 500,000 or more. The smaller

communities and rural are hurting.

DR. TURNER LEE: Yeah, you know, I'm choked up because my daughter had a Girl Scout Zoom meeting the other day and they were asked to say — the question was: What would you tell your school board? And 90% of the girls said, “We want to go back to school, we want to go back to school.” And it was so interesting to hear in this 21st century kids sort of say I want to go back. But they all recognize in part that they can't because of the public health crisis.

So I completely agree with you and my heart hopes that we will have some national strategy for school reopening.

John, I want to go to you as a foundation person. And you also wore a previous hat because you were headmaster of a school for many, many years and education is how we both met when we were actually starting to tackle the digital divide.

This conversation that you're hearing today is an all hands-on deck strategy. And I remember at the beginning of the pandemic I had foundations basically say to me, “Well what do we do, what's our role?” You know, because they were not necessarily brought to the table. And I think the superintendents would agree at the beginning they sort of were funding other things, but not broadband access.

You have actually partnered with the Chicago Public Schools at the Foundation. Other foundations have sort of amplified what needs to be done. Can you speak a little bit about that and what role you think philanthropy across the country should be doing to sort of level this playing field going forward?

MR. PALFREY: Thanks, Nicol. And really, I would echo the huge, huge, huge thanks to the superintendents, educators on this call and all you represent. This has been — I can't imagine — having been a head of a school, I cannot imagine the conversations you've had to have and the amount of work you've had to do. So you have our great thanks. You're underappreciated, underpaid, all those things, but you're doing amazing things for our future, so thank you.

And, Nicol, you know, I think the advocacy you have put in for many, many years on this topic is now front and center and I'm delighted to see it held up in this panel through Brookings and through other conversations.

So one reason I am optimistic is your determination that we will not have a digital divide of this sort into the future. And I believe that your new book and other things will pave the way.

So back to Chicago. You know, where I'm based, it was straight forward, as the data that you shared nationally. We estimated that one in five kids last spring did not have access to the learning that they were supposed to be doing as the schools had been shut down. That's not a surprise for a city like ours and our south and west sides were predominantly where the shortages were, and that is almost exclusively Black and Latino communities. So the national story often takes hold in Chicago and is amplified, and sure enough, that was absolutely true here. No question about that.

And, you know, the Chicago Public Schools is a very good school system. It is coming up in lots and lots of ways, it's got some wonderful leadership. And we were very happy as a philanthropy to be able to partner directly with President and Mrs. Obama in their philanthropy and then a bunch of other foundations. And the idea was to say in this moment of crisis: Could we help get more broadband access and more tools directly to kids? And we actually did a lot of our grant making through, as Superintendent Diaz said, to the community based organizations and others sort of around the structure. So there's a combination of trying to support the kids and families directly, but also the crucial CBOs that play a role. And, you know, look, I think the Chicago model is a good one, it is sound. We needed to do it. It is not the answer, as Mayor Price says, though. It is not the answer to rely on — the amount of money we even as very wealthy foundations have pales in comparison to the amount obviously spent nationally and through the state and municipal budgets.

So we've got to have a better policy and you all are working on that. I hope what we learn from this is that broadband should just be like electricity. And that's true in rural areas, as you've written, Nicol, so much in your work, and in the urban areas we're mostly talking about today. And particularly, we've seen this in this pandemic, it cannot be that kids either can or can't go to school based on having this access. It cannot be that then that falls disproportionately yet again on those who are Black and Brown in our society, or from the financial perspective, those on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. We just can't have that. It's not going to work. And, as you say, it's a workforce issue, going forward it's an equity issue, it's a moral issue, it's at technological issue, and so forth.

And so much more to be said, but I really feel we have to fix this.

DR. TURNER LEE: Yeah, we're going to talk about — because now we actually can speak to the president-elect and the vice president-elect, so hold your thoughts on this.

But I want to go to you, Jon. I mean I think what John Palfrey is talking about is this piece that I've been thinking about, which is No Child Left Offline. And someone asked me the other day, "Why would you want to use something that was probably driven by the GOP?" and I said, "Because education should be bipartisan going forward."

But, Jon, your work has suggested that this has not been a bipartisan issue here and, perhaps, we're where we are because it has been so partisan, particularly with the overlay with the pandemic as well as the racial inequities that have transpired. With the killing of George Floyd that was amplified. I mean police killings had started before George Floyd, folks, and it's continued after him. But we really became much more sensitized to that.

Jon, talk to us. I mean can we reach with all the partisanship on a school choice, school openings, public schools, this, that, and the other thing — any type of consensus around it?

MR. VALANT: I hope so. But thanks, Nicol, and thanks all of you. It's nice to be with you all. Echo John's thoughts, too, about just how in awe I am of superintendents and mayors across the country and all the work you're doing.

So, yeah, so I'll give a little bit of the sort of stepping back perspective. So spring, I think Dr. Diaz said it felt like it was building a plane while flying. And that's a sentiment I heard from lots of places across the country. And spring didn't go all that well in lots of very understandable ways, with districts caught flat footed and it being very difficult. With more time, it seems like things are maybe a little bit better now, but still with plenty of challenges.

So in fall, at the beginning of the school year, it looks like about half of the schools across the country opened entirely remotely, about a quarter opened fully in person, and then a quarter were hybrid. That's changed over time. It seems like more schools have been opening in person over time, although now as we're sort of getting into what looks like it might not be a good winter as far as the virus goes — we'll sort of see what happens. And that mix is not necessarily a bad thing. So I'm of the view that there isn't a good solution to this problem, it's just a really nasty terrible problem that looks different

depending on where you are in the country.

And, on one hand, keeping kids out of school is terrible. I mean instructional quality delivered online is not what it is when it's delivered in person. The ability to connect with counselors and friends, and just all of the things that come with being in school, you just cannot fully get when you're talking about online instruction.

At the same time, there clearly are circumstances when bringing kids into schools is dangerous, whether it's for the kids themselves or their teachers and staff, or it's the community as a whole. And we see patterns in which schools came back, in which schools did not. And they interact in interesting ways with the digital divide. So rural schools were much more likely to come back in person than urban schools. Schools that serve predominantly Black and Latino families were more likely to stay virtual. And so you start to ask, well, why is that? Why is that schools seem like they're responding in different ways? And it might be that ideally that would be: health conditions. That we see schools that are responding to whatever the conditions are on the ground so that — where it's safest to come back, that's where you see schools coming back. And that unfortunately — so some of the work that I've been doing is sort of looking at which schools did come back and the relationship between local health conditions and what schools did is not very strong. It doesn't seem like it was primarily health conditions that were driving what it was that schools were doing, it's a mix of other things. And some of it is certainly politics, as Nicol was suggesting.

And so if you look, for example, at — if you like try to explain school opening decisions and you put a bunch of variables in and you try to see which one seems like it really explains it. Political variables, like how much a county supported President Trump in 2016, are really strong predictors. And they're much stronger predictors than anything about local health conditions. And I don't know that that's necessarily a surprise. We've seen a lot of COVID — that the COVID response has been politicized, whether that's masks or hydroxychloroquine or Anthony Fauci, and schools are sort of wrapped up in that. And we have an administration that pushed very hard on school re-openings, and then a reaction to that, where other folks were sort of led to believe that you should go just as strong in the opposite direction.

And my view is that's dangerous. That what politics can do in decision making like this is it can cloud it and it can cause the types of considerations that we don't want to be part of school

reopening decisions and how to serve kids decisions to sort of come to the front.

And then the other part of this is when you look at surveys of parents from across the country, we see really different patterns depending on families' backgrounds. So Black and Latino parents have been reporting much less desire to return their kids in school, and that's despite reporting a lot more concern about what happens if their kids don't go back to school with respect to loss of service and learning loss, and all of those kind of things. And some of that is just less confidence that schools will be able to keep them safe, as tragic as that thought is.

So just putting all of that together, I think it's alarming. I mean you have kids who have had the fewest opportunities, who began the year farthest behind, have been most likely to be out of school. And they have the most limited resources for distance learning at a time when home resources are probably more important than ever for determining what kinds of opportunities kids have. And when you put that together with all of the other challenges that are disproportionately affecting certain communities across the country, you have a recipe for the problem to get a lot worse.

And so I hope that we can sort of figure this out in some kind of bipartisan way, but I'm not sure that I'm there yet.

DR. TURNER LEE: No, I mean I agree with you. The superintendent of Alabama made this comment, which I thought was so interesting. He said when they surveyed the state of who wanted to go back to school and who wanted to be virtual, he said actually a lot of Latina and African American parents wanted to actually go back to school — wanted to be more virtual — excuse me — because of the fear of the virus, right, infection, but they actually lived in communities where they didn't have access. And that correlated with poverty and other things.

I want to go back to the superintendents. I mean part of this book that I'm writing is about this other America, right. It's called "Digitally Invisible" because it's not necessarily a binary digital divide, who has access, who doesn't, but it's people who sit locked, who are locked into a series of systemic inequality. I would love for all of you to talk about, from an urban perspective and a rural perspective, what is it that we're actually addressing now when it comes to system inequalities, what's the consequence? I mean are we looking at another *Brown v. Board of Education* because kids didn't have resources? What do you see are some of the challenges — truancy, mental health — that are actually

impacting kids because of these conversations that we're having?

Go ahead, Superintendent Diaz.

MS. DIAZ: I think what's very important is for the local level, state level, and at the national level to really have an anti-racist lens. Our school systems were not created for Brown and Black students. And so how do we change the trajectory to ensure that, number one, Gloria Ladson-Billings said this really, really good quote that I always use, she said, “There's not an achievement gap, it's a funding gap.” So we really need to think about the state level what are we going to do to fund education in a way that is equitable for all students. And at the same time at the federal level, what are they going to do to ensure that in all — in our entire United States of America that we have all of the funds that we need for Title funds, etc.?

So I think it's important that we first look at having an anti-racist lens when we're talking about funding opportunities for school districts, especially for school districts that have students that experience houselessness and students that experience poverty. I think that's the number one thing to do, and that's going to be my advocacy there.

Another thing is that we have to really think about our calendar. Our calendar was created with agriculture. And I know that we're very comfortable with it, but how do we do it differently so that we don't have the summer learning loss that we have? And right now, we have COVID loss, right. So how do we have that conversation and change how we do our calendar as well so that students have an opportunity to continue to learn even during the summer, even during the winter? Not that we want them to — we want them to have balance as well, but how do we do it in a way that they want to be engaged at the same time?

So those are my two things right there, is how do we all have an anti-racist lens, because our schools weren't created for Brown and Black students, and then how do we also think about the funding source, to make sure that we have an equitable funding source for our school districts that our students that are in our districts experience poverty, houselessness, and have been under served, have been marginalized for decades in our system?

DR. TURNER LEE: Wow. Superintendent Torres-Rodriguez?

MS. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ: So in addition to what Superintendent Diaz said, you know,

I reflect on the fact that when we started school this year we had 2,100 out of almost 17,000 students that we just could not find. We couldn't find them. Today our team has made over 1,000 home visits. These are not just wellness checks, these are not going to homes and checking in, these are home visits with a team from school and community based organizations, collectively, trying to address, with our families, what additional supports they have. So that alone is an indication that it is not just about an educational access issue, but we have the healthcare issue, we have the employment — I mean all these other factors. And so to that I do believe that it requires an ecological, an ecosystem approach to trying to solve for the inequities that exist.

And then from an achievement perspective, you know, for us a plan for what I call remote-only learning was a plan to increase the achievement and outcome gap. So to the extent possible that it was safe to do so, and our external health metrics and conditions allowed us, we were going to offer an in-person learning because I reflected on what we knew and what studies were showing, right. Studies were showing, I think McKinsey, right, that in the spring 3.1 months of learning that was lost. And so you forecast that out and at the end of all of this, potentially you're having 12.4 months of learning loss. And for a district that is predominantly students, one, of color and, you know, SES, that has a significant impact, not just on our students, but on their families and families to come.

DR. TURNER LEE: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I know, and if you read that study carefully they said, what, a year for low income kids of learning loss and 10. — I mean it — that study is — so if you haven't seen this McKinsey study, it really suggests the lack of retention.

But John Palfrey, I want to go back to you, though. I mean this takes a village, right? And, Mayor, I'm going to come back to you and Jon as we sort of go from this local to this federal strategy. Is there a role that we should be playing to invest in community infrastructure? So I made this point in a recent blog that I wrote, that we've got to transform these digital parking lots where these kids are walking to Taco Bell or to the library to digital parks, or maybe get some of that unused equipment at the businesses that are closing, these big businesses that are opening their spaces.

How do we actually begin to invest in these local infrastructures that could potentially help offset some of these issues that we're seeing within our vulnerable families and among our students and families?

MR. PALFREY: Nicol, I love the way you're thinking about it and what you've been writing about that.

I often think of these as called the interstitial spaces, like the spaces in between different places where kids are often connected and could do some learning. I'm a huge believer in supporting libraries. I think they are a cheap date. And the cities that I've seen and the school districts in other parts of the country that have connected the schools well with libraries, obviously that's a huge positive. We didn't have that early on in COVID when the libraries were shut down, but we certainly saw our families going to parking lots near libraries to get the Wi-Fi, that whole thing which is absurd, but the reality. And, as you've said, McDonalds and Starbucks are often the most common places to get free Wi-Fi in some communities, especially if the library is not available.

So thinking about the way in which students are learning inside and outside. As many of you have said, mobile devices are much more likely the way that some kids are getting learning. It's not as good as on the laptops. We know that's the reality. So thinking through the mobile environments that we're offering kids and noting that there is obviously a higher penetration of the kids of color and the lower SES kids having these devices than others.

So I think you're exactly right to say we need to focus on and support the heck out of our schools in our cities and in our rural environments, but then also look at the community based organizations, the libraries, the other kinds of ways in which kids are learning and see if we can stitch that together to help. It's not going to answer the things that (inaudible) superintendents are talking about, but provide some important supplements.

DR. TURNER LEE: No, I agree and I think we have these local divides, right. There were many school districts — and I think the superintendents can actually attest to this — that didn't even know who was servicing their area in terms of broadband. So I know that there were many superintendents that became broadband champions, and that's not what you were supposed to do, you know.

I mean, Mayor Price, you are a mayor. You know city budgets are tight. But I would love to hear from you because I have not quite had this answer. How are cities navigating through this? And before you answer, I want to make sure people send your questions to events@Brookings.edu or tweet

them at #DigitalSchools.

So, Mayor, what are you looking at in terms of city budgets and how we can actually address and remedy some of these concerns?

MR. PRICE: Well, first of all, let me say I was on the school board for eight years, two years as chair, and I know what the schools are going through and, you know, schools never have enough. And with budgets we never have enough that we can give schools, especially buildings that are now construction — our state stopped funding construction, so it's left up to the cities to jump in to do that. To be fiduciary we can only carry so much debt. We have a new school now that we're trying to build a replacement. They're wanting $50 million for about 600 students. It's just, you know, a challenge.

The other thing is when I was on the school board we would talk about equality. And equality — you know, putting two resource teachers in every school is equal, but it's not equitable. You have to put the resources where the need is. And to do that, it's challenging. You know, I represent with the African American Mayors Association about 500 Black mayors in the country. And what we're trying to do is get together so that when we are asked, and I hope we are, what is it you need in your schools, what is it you need in your cities to help students who have — we've all described, are behind in everything so that we can have a conduit — AAMA could be a conduit to those localities so that we can have a consensus of and prioritize those needs. And I'm hopeful that we will have a voice in the next administration as this national plan is developing, that we will be able to have a voice in that issue.

Again, until we do something on a national big time where we can put private PPP together, private partnerships along with school divisions, because the cities are not going to be able to do this on our own. We just can't do it. And until we have federal priority of schools and funding that comes down to the local level, it won't happen. It just — we can't do it.

DR. TURNER LEE: In terms of the federal — let's shift to the federal. And I want everybody to think about —

— in just a few moments — we've got questions coming in — we got a new administration. At the federal level what should we be trying to do to ask how to get that money down to the local schools?

MR. PRICE: Well, let me jump in first.

DR. TURNER LEE: Yeah, go ahead.

MR. PRICE: First, you need someone in the education department that knows something about education. Let's start here if we're going to come top down.

DR. TURNER LEE: No, we need an appointment, yeah. (Laughter)

MR. PRICE: If we're going to go top down, let's have someone who is an expert in educating kids. And then getting the resources from these superintendents, who know what they need in their communities, to pass that information up so that those funds can be distributed in the right direction.

DR. TURNER LEE: That's right. I propose that there should be — and I don't know what people think about this — some type of office of innovation that works in coordination with the city, that comes out of schools, right. Not the city office of innovation, but the education office of innovation.

MR. PRICE: That's a great idea. That's a great idea.

DR. TURNER LEE: You know that is sort of telling us this is what we need in terms of hot spots, in terms of coordination, on mental health checks, and using technology actually for the public good.

But, John, I mean I don't know, what should we be telling Biden-Harris going forward? What should be our message?

MR. PALFREY: So to Mayor Price's point, I think if you look at what the federal responsibility is in education, what federal government is good at doing in education, it tends to be, one, providing funding, and — I mean now more than ever, especially with what's happening with state and local budgets, there's going to be a push for funding. I think we're going to see that, so I do think there's some hope there.

The other side is sort of what I see from the federal government, is it's protecting students' civil rights. And both of those are really at play in all of this.

And just to step back for a second, Superintendent Diaz mentioned Gloria Ladson-Billings' line about not thinking in terms of achievement gaps. Now, I really like that. I think that's the right way to think about this stuff, and I do think it's important for — so it's — I'm not usually a pessimistic person, but I will say that I am not there yet on believing that the work is done. And I mean if we're just talking about things like Black-white opportunity gaps as they show up in test scores, those gaps are really big and they're not closing at a pace that, to my eye, will actually get us to closing those gaps in the

lifetime of anyone on this phone call. So that's our starting point.

And so to actually make some progress, we need to do some big things to actually get that done. I think where I am sort of optimistic, where I think we might see some work is there's some sort of low hanging fruit. So some of it is devices and high speed internet and some of the things that we should have done a long time ago because, as has been said here, we really should be thinking about internet access is just as essential as electricity. You just can't go through school without having high quality internet access.

Also, kids' physical health. So the research on the effects of cleaning up the air that kids breathe and the water they drink is really striking. I mean it's really strong effects, not just on their health outcomes but their academic outcomes. And I think hopefully this focuses some attention on — I mean infrastructure has become kind of a punch line, but it's really important. And it's going to be really important at schools, a part of whatever infrastructure work gets done and some of those funds really do get drawn into schools.

But then beyond that, I think to really get the big work done, we're going to need to talk about real funding to bring in more people into schools and have kids work with tutors and give more support, whether it's counseling or smaller classes. Those are the investments that I think we're really going to need.

I do think the focus of the Biden administration will be, at least early, very much on increasing resources. So I do think there's some reason for optimism there.

DR. TURNER LEE: Right.

MR. PRICE: Nicol, if I could add one thing to that too. What we're doing locally is trying anything and everything we can. There's a thing called Tutor.com that I think my city was the first in the state to sign up for. And I think it's through the Princeton Review. But those types of things we're trying to be creative and looking at the things that are out there until we do have this hopeful national plan to attack this. Superintendents and teachers and council member and mayors are trying every resource they can to temporarily get through this until we do have a national effort.

DR. TURNER LEE: You know, and that something — and before we go to Q&A — I have to put this out there folks — I do think though, we run the risk — and I want to go back to

Superintendent Diaz's comment about the wildfires — COVID was just one scenario where we had to send kids home. Wildfires, another scenario. It may be something else that comes up, another scenario. Isn't it about time — this is the concept of No Child Left Offline. It's not something that I totally take full responsibility for. Jessica Rosenworcel from the FCC was on my podcast, she brought it up, and I'm like I'm running with that one, girlfriend, because isn't it time that we actually look at this problem not just as a technology issue, but we also look at it as how do re-imagine education. So what does education look like in the 21st century?

I really want to push you a little bit, right, because we have an audience now that may run to the public health side of it and forget about the anti-racism side, or my run to actually do home broadband access, but may forget about the fact that we need to make sure homeless shelters and other transition house is connected.

Three things — or two things that you would tell the Biden-Harris administration right now. And then, John, I'm going to leave it to you, two things that you would tell the philanthropic community right now that we should actually be saying.

So, Superintendent Diaz, two things we should be actually telling legislators right now to actually get the ball moving on this.

MS. DIAZ: I would say that connectivity is a basic need within education and has to be treated as such by the elected officials in government. So there needs to be broadband legislation to ensure all kids have access. So that would be my number one suggestion.

The other thing is that we can't ensure online access for all students without a strong public-private partnership. In addition to government funding we need private sector investment from internet providers and we need government and private sector partners to support high speed internet access as a public utility, just like water and electricity. It's been said before, which means it should be an expectation that everyone — everyone has access, with public assistance provided for those who need support.

This goes beyond education, of course, as it will also provide access to telehealth and other services.

DR. TURNER LEE: Yes, yes. It's a multiplier effect — multiplier effect. Yes.

Superintendent Torres-Rodriguez.

MS. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ: So I would say that we need a whole child approach to solving it, right. We need to think about the health needs that our students have, we need to create safe environments, we have to engage students, and that means that in order to engage students we have to take into account culturally, right, who they are, where they come from, that they are seen, that their stories are seen, they have to feel supported and they have to be challenged.

And so, yes, instructional delivery will have to shift and all of the supports that are necessary for the student not only to catch up and to continue to sustain and then further thrive. So a holistic approach.

DR. TURNER LEE: Yes. And I — you haven't about the safety. I don't know about all of you, but I've just been so disheartened by the fact that because of COVID the wellness checks to students' homes cut down and we've actually seen cases — this is a true story, it happened in Chicago – – where kids are actually in unsafe environments that are being sometimes revealed through Zoom calls in terms of the abuse against our children. That is — the whole child approach is not — I'm a huge digital access fan, but I now think that digital access is now no longer 10th on the list, it's a subset of number one, of number two, of number three, in terms of how we deliver services.

I'll come back to you, Mayor Price. Jon Valant, what would be your appeal to the federal administration in terms of what we need to do?

MR. VALANT: Yeah, so a couple of thoughts. First that we need to solve the long-term problem not just the short-term problem. It's tempting to think of this as sort of Band-Aids and we need to get hot spots out and we need to get tablets out, but the goal in my mind on the technology side is universal broadband, and we need to be moving toward that goal and not just getting ourselves through these next few months.

And then I would say, second, it is understanding that that is being felt very differently by different groups of kids across the country. And it's going to require some investment. And I think one place to look for solutions is beyond the U.S. And there's some interesting work going on around the world with really high dosage tutoring, so getting kids who need extra support to have extra instructional help. And I think that's a promising way to go

DR. TURNER LEE: Mayor?

MR. PRICE: Well, I think there's a short-term and a long-term. We need immediately funding to handle the local situation that we're going through. But long-term I hope that there are going to be people, bright people like on this panel, that will look at just the whole model of education. You know, we're on the whole agricultural model of 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., you know, nine months. Do we need keep these kids from eight in the morning to nine at night 24/7 the whole year? I mean just the whole educational model.

I'm concerned with a balance between the digital divide and those who are not getting their social needs — you know, you heard from these kids, they want to go back to school. Think of yourself, the good time you had, the friends you — lifelong friends you found in school. We need to have some type of also way of having social involvement, even these kids who are going to stay home and not come back to school, they need to be able to interact. We are seeing that now and in employment, people don't know how to interact with people because they're on the internet all the time. So the social skills concern me as well.

But I guess local funding and long-term approach to this whole model of education, because it's going to effect how we build, will we need more schools at the level that we're having now because there may be fewer people in our schools.

DR. TURNER LEE: Yeah, yeah. You know, I think that's so interesting that you said that because on the one hand, when these kids complain about wanting to go to back to school for the social, we in Fairfax County have the option of sending our kids to school or doing the co-instruction model. So I shared it with my daughter and she said, “I don't think I can wear that mask for eight hours, mommy, I just can't.” She said, “I can't wear it for eight hours.” But at the same token, the teacher told me that it's not going to be the same social, right. So nothing is going to be normal in terms of the socializing.

Which brings me, John, to the bullets and call to action for the philanthropic community, because obviously there's things that we can do federally, change the E-Rate program to provide subsidized broadband access, figure out ways to strengthen the social contract that we have when it comes to universal broadband, find ways to empower cities to be able to do that. One person actually suggested a voucher program for people to get access.

But what's the call to the philanthropic community here?

MR. PALFREY: All that, Nicol, or all that — or Dr. Turner Lee. We're totally lean in to all those things and what you said.

But from the philanthropic community, you know, we don't have anywhere near the amount of money that any of these other actors do, but what we do is we can act quickly and we can act in a way that creates leverage. And so I think finding models, and Chicago is one, but there are lots of others out there that we can point to and say, look, this is a way to see the connected learning that's happening across these environments, these are the kinds of gaps we now have identified and these are some ways to fill it and to push on that as examples that then can help unlock these policy debates.

The second would be that philanthropy I think has to spend more money when times are harder. So we've had this strange model that basically we spend more money when the stock market is highest, which is when we have the biggest amount in the bank and the most coming up. We need to say we're going to spend the most money when the times are hardest. And so that's why MacArthur Foundation raised a bunch of debt on our balance sheet. The Mayor was saying you can raise so much, see, well, we have big balance sheets so we can raise some debt, which we did, and put out more money when it's needed.

So I would say the philanthropic community, whether you're an education funder or not, all of this is connected to all of the things that you're trying to accomplish. You might be a workforce funder, you might be a climate funder, you might be a criminal justice funder, but what we're talking about today does have connectivity to that. We need to come out of pocket, spend some more money, and help solve some of these problems, or at least help the rest of you solve the problems, be some of that capital in terms of ideas and in terms of money.

DR. TURNER LEE: You know, and I also would suggest too one other thing — and I've been talking about this across the country, is we could actually use some dollars to evaluate what's actually happened in the last seven months.

Mr. PALFREY: Absolutely. There's a natural experiment here. Absolutely, yeah. That's a good point.

DR. TURNER LEE: It really is. I mean I know in my work I'm looking at three cities

across the country to figure out what happened. You know, one is a city that had potentially municipal broadband, another city that I've been checking out is a city that is starting from scratch, another one is a city that is primarily rural — you know, places primarily rural. I don't think we're going to have enough data — and I love the way flying the plane or building the plane — or flying it while you're working is good, but you've got to land it every once in a while, and figure out whether or not you've got enough gas, you've got enough people, and it's actually working. And so maybe that's another area where philanthropy I think can play a role.

I want to turn to a question in terms of something that we didn't go into detail around, but I think maybe people want to hear this, and that is: If any of you could comment on what you think the nuances are between rural schools, very rural schools and urban schools? We often talk about schools with this generic concept, but I'm sure there are different challenges for our rural schools versus our urban, despite the fact that both urban and rural have broadband adoption and digital divide issues.

So I know Newport News, Superintendent Diaz, any experiences, Superintendent Torres-Rodriguez (inaudible) rural schools are experiencing, John or Jon?

MS. DIAZ: I personally know a few of my colleagues that of course you've already said it, Dr. Turner Lee, that families and students have to go to their local fast food restaurant or library to use their parking lot to get access to Wi-Fi. So I think that's one of the experiences that I know my colleagues have shared in our superintendent calls here in Oregon.

And I worked in a rural school system in Washington State and I remember when the electricity would go out, because it was a small little island. So not only not having broadband system, but what about when the electricity goes out? So how are students going to remain online, especially if you live in a rural area? So those are the kind of things that are different. Not that it doesn't happen in urban areas, but it happens more I believe in rural areas than it does in urban areas.

So those are the two things that stood out for me is not just the access to internet, but also when the electricity goes out you don't have access to really much of anything until they get it up and running again.

DR. TURNER LEE: Yeah. And this panel I was on, just to add to it — and I wish this teacher had actually participated today because he just took my heart when he shared about in a very

rural school that he's in — and I think it was West Virginia or — actually it was on the West Coast. It was actually in Oregon, someplace in Oregon, where he shared that they have so many kids missing that they just don't know what to do. Because of the topography, they can't even get to some of the kids' homes in time to, you know, sort of figure out what's going on in the household. And it was a young teacher that was actually sharing this.

Another question — or anybody else want to comment on that one and then I'll go to another question?

Second question comes from Kayla at UMD. She said, how do we know that we've made an impact? All these efforts, all these Post-It Notes that have been flying, all this creativity, what will be the impact? How will we know that we got through this pandemic with our own cure, to a certain extent, and what will that mean for the students going forward?

MR. PRICE: Well, I'll take a stab. But I think once we get through this and we look back, and I'm sure the superintendents have a plan to retest and see where the scores are and see if — a knowledge based test, how much have the kids lost during this period. I would think there would be an assessment time needed to evaluate just how bad the effect of what has gone on.

And then, as you said, comparing these three different types of schools and populations and see if something worked here. We have a thing here, if it's working duplicate it. So if it's working in one area, let's duplicate it and multiply it and put it out there so that we can all share in those good results.

DR. TURNER LEE: Go ahead, Jon.

MR. VALANT: Yeah, so just to pick up on that thought about assessments. I think actually one of the hardest parts in all of this and the most complicated is figuring out how to do assessments, because we do need assessment for data to try to understand what's working and where it's working and what's not. But at the same time assessment can go really wrong. And so getting that balance right where we're sort of getting data that we can learn from, both locally and then more broadly, while not bringing in accountability, which is messy, and also not using assessment as sort of a gatekeeper that where kids who don't do well on tests right now get locked out of future opportunities at a time when a lot of kids are not going to do very well for reasons that are not their fault. It's going to be

important that we try to find a way to do that, but necessary.

MR. PRICE: Also, when you're tying funding to accreditation of schools, you know, these schools now probably the test scores are going to be lower and then we're trying to make sure that — you know, industry as far as a mayor, we're looking at people who want to come in with jobs and the first thing they look at is the schools. So if you've got several or increase in schools that are not accredited, that's going to have an economic impact, which is just a vicious cycle in itself.

DR. TURNER LEE: Yeah. I mean among the superintendents, I can't help but ask this question. I was there. I mean my daughter is an A student. The grades didn't look too good about two weeks ago. I had to go back to my educator mama and email every teacher to see what — because I realized she wasn't that kind of learner. You know, this isn't her thing. Her thing is being in person.

What are you colleagues saying about these adjustments — and we'll wrap up there — these adjustments in terms of just learning and taking a breath and realizing that maybe we might lose a good six or seven months of learning for our kids?

MS. TORRES-RODRIGUEZ: I think it's a maybe. I think it's going to happen for — at least in my context, the majority of our kids, right. So coming in and being as transparent and humbly, you know, accepting that that we have so much work now more than ever to do, and the urgency behind that.

And then the other piece is I understand the assessment and I agree with what Jon just listed as to how we approach it and how we build capacity moving forward in the adults that are going to be necessary to mitigate and accelerate, right, the learning loss that has happened. I worry about us only focusing on the academic piece. There is all the other social and emotional assessment that we would have to make. You know, developmentally speaking, from a psychosocial development perspective, our students' needs have not been met. They haven't. And so how do we measure for that, right? So that requires a completely different lens for the strategy.

DR. TURNER LEE: Yeah, you know, we're at time. I could keep you all for another hour, but I won't, because I promised some of your assistants that I would have you off this call.

But I want to say this as I'm closing, first of all, I want to say thank you to everybody. Thank you. You don't know how much I do stay up at night thinking about this, both as a parent and as a

person who believes that we need to close this divide for the future of economic opportunity. But I also want to thank you because I think you put out there to the universe what's really happening out there. And now that we have a new administration, I think what I heard everybody say, it is important for us to close this digital divide. It's just going to get wider and wider and people are going to become more and more invisible. And so taking that seriously in this 21st century matters. In fact, the skills our kids may be learning today may be the skills that they need in the new future of industry as more and more industries close that are brick and mortar.

And I think the second thing that we're finding out, that this is not just an issue that we need to look at in terms of the rich versus the poor. It affects everybody, right? As I go through it I get a tutor, but what about those families that cannot get a tutor? What about those families that work? This is why it's an all-hands-on-deck strategy.

And so I would say to all of you who are listening, keep pushing. And I would echo my colleagues in saying to every educational administrator, teacher, parent, you are our heroes because we need you to keep our kids straight going forward. Yes, I would snap to that, I would scream, I would even get on my table, but I'm not wearing any shoes. But to tell you we need to make sure that we remember the role that educators play in this debate.

Thank you, everybody. Please continue to follow us. If this is an area of interest to you, we just actually had a podcast on CTI on Tech Tank. Just look it up on Apple, Spotify, and Acast on school reopening. This event will be broadcast on the Brookings website for later review. Pass it onto people. And if, by chance, President-elect Biden and Vice President Harris are listening, we got the plan. Just listen to this podcast, listen to this webinar.

Thank you, everybody, for joining us.

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