



Monroe County, Local Funders Collaborate to Solve Internet Connectivity Issues Faced by Rochester City School District Students

The pandemic uncovered glaring gaps in technology for students in the City of Rochester. Local and national foundations and others responded quickly to get laptop computers, tablets, and devices to provide internet connections into the homes of students who needed them.

The continuation of remote learning for Rochester City School District (RCSD) students this fall raised another issue: Individual hotspot devices distributed in the spring for use at home have not provided enough speed and a consistent connection required for effective online learning.

Monroe County, ESL, Greater Rochester Health Foundation (GRHF), and Rochester Area Community Foundation (RACF) are collaborating with RCSD on a solution to improve internet connectivity to help more students actively participate in their lessons throughout the school day.

“I am extremely grateful for the generosity and innovative spirit of our partners who are helping to ensure that our students receive the best education possible during a global pandemic,” says RCSD Superintendent Dr. Lesli Myers-Small. “For many of us, having reliable internet access is a given. For many of our students, getting this access will not only help with their education, it also brings them to a more equitable playing field.”

T-Mobile’s Project 10Million is donating 2,900 mobile hotspots to be distributed to RCSD students in kindergarten through high school who don’t have reliable internet connections.

Monroe County has committed to using up to \$175,000 of the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act money to cover the \$43,000 monthly connectivity costs for those devices through December 31.

The three organizations are working together to coordinate among other area philanthropies to support the purchase of additional mobile hotspots for up to 2,000 more students. Monroe County also will cover the \$32,000 monthly unlimited data charges for these devices for November and December.

Local funders are committed to contributing and raising additional resources to continue to pay the \$83,000 monthly unlimited data charges for all of these new hotspots through summer school, which ends in August.

“The collaborative work being done in our community across public, private and nonprofit sectors to address the critical needs of families during this pandemic is the exact kind of regional collaboration we need to solve Greater Rochester’s challenges,” says Ajamu Kitwana, vice president/director, community impact at ESL Federal Credit Union. “The collaboration between Monroe County and the City School District has motivated us to match the county’s funding as a show of deep support for that partnership.”

With ESL paying for two months of internet connectivity and GRHF and RACF committing to each pay for one month, that leaves four monthly bills not yet covered. To close that gap, ESL will match additional contributions to the effort, up to a total of \$350,000. United Way of Greater Rochester has pitched in \$25,000, which is the first gift to be matched by ESL.

“As we continue to navigate this unprecedented pandemic, we need to work together to ensure our students have the resources they need to learn and succeed. This is no small task,” says Monroe County Executive Adam J. Bello. “Thanks to the support of our community partners, we’re able to ensure that RCSD students will have reliable WiFi for the rest of the school year.”

The issue of city households with little or no internet connections was highlighted in an April 15 report by ROC the Future on the digital divide in Rochester. The U.S. Census indicates that while 80 percent of Rochester residents have broadband access, 20 percent have no internet and 17 percent rely solely on their cellular phone’s data plan. This leaves 37 percent of city residents with limited functionality for educational purposes.

“Our hope is that other local funders, businesses, community organizations, and even individuals will be interested in joining us to support better remote learning for our children,” says Simeon Banister, vice president for Community Programs at the Community Foundation.

There are indications that the City School District’s Pre-K students also may need better internet access at home, so additional resources may be needed, Banister added.

To take advantage of ESL’s matching offer, contributions can be made online to the COVID Education Fund at www.racf.org/COVIDEducation or mail checks to Rochester Area Community Foundation, 500 East Avenue, Rochester, NY 14607.

For more information or to arrange interviews, contact one of the following:

- **Meaghan McDermott**, Monroe County: MeaghanMcDermott@monroecounty.gov
- **Rich Pulvino**, ESL: rpulvino@esl.org
- **Mary Holleran**, Rochester Area Community Foundation: mholleran@racf.org
- **Tiana Stephens**, Greater Rochester Health Foundation: tstephens@thegrhf.org
- **Marisol Ramos-Lopez**, Rochester City School District: Marisol.Lopez@rcsdk12.org