

## Bridging LA's Digital Divide: **EMBARGOED UNTIL 6AM WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22, 2020**

Increasing Access to WiFi and Technology for Low-Income Communities and Communities of Color

During the past month as organizations moved quickly to support students and families in the wake of the spread of COVID-19, many technology and internet companies scrambled to offer "free" internet and wifi services for students and families in low-income communities. Companies like Google, Verizon, AT&T, Comcast and Charter, along with government leaders, started to advertise these deals as ways to bridge the digital divide.

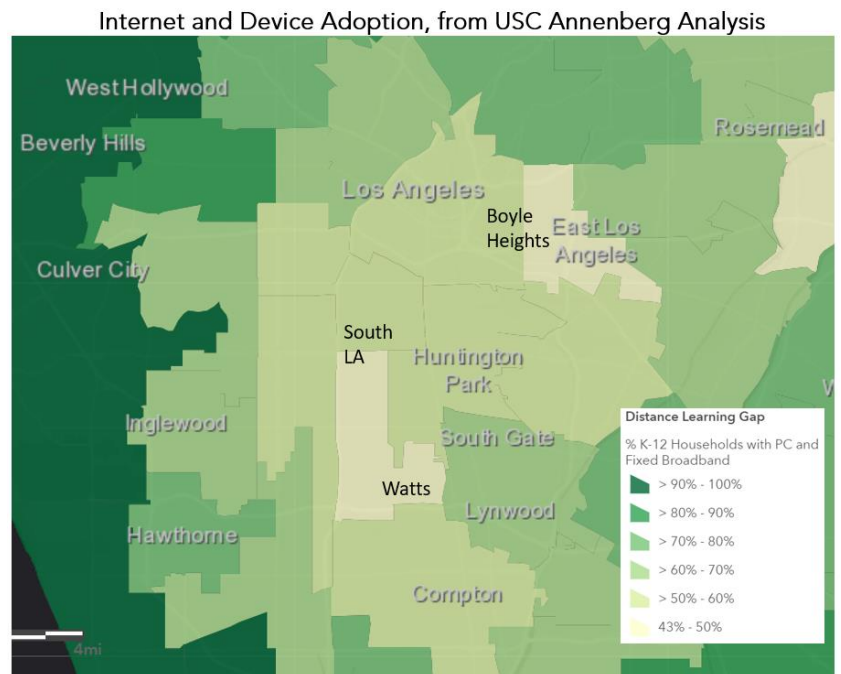
We applaud the collaborative action by government leaders and corporate technology partners to expand internet access and enable distance learning for all California students - regardless of income. In particular, we commend LA Unified's swift decision to allocate \$100 million toward the purchase of new laptops and internet hotspots. This investment is necessary and commendable, and we are encouraged by early progress by LA Unified to increase access in students' homes.

At the same time, we need to monitor the implementation of technology companies' advertised initiatives to ensure they meet the needs of students and families who face the greatest and most urgent barriers to technology access and distance learning. Based on our investigation, we find that most of the offers promoted by technology companies don't yet do enough to connect low-income communities and communities of color in Los Angeles.

As an organization providing on-the-ground support to educators and families in Watts, South LA and Boyle Heights, we are deeply invested in ensuring that promises become reality so that essential technology effectively reaches our students and families. To understand the current needs of our families and the barriers they are facing to access technology, we conducted research in late March and early April:

- We interviewed over 1,000 LA Unified families about their current technology needs
- We made over 50 customer calls to internet companies that are currently promoting special offers to families of LA Unified students

Our findings underscore that despite the current efforts of state and local political leaders and the largest internet companies, the digital divide persists as a real barrier to student learning. In LA Unified, an estimated one-third of students have no broadband internet access at home.<sup>i</sup> As a recent USC Annenberg analysis shows (see map), gaps in access are most profound in particular neighborhoods, including the neighborhoods we serve (Watts, South LA and Boyle Heights). Furthermore, "free" internet offers are mostly unavailable to these families or require signing up for contracts that require substantial fees once the trial period ends or paying significant up-front deposits.



In order to make distance learning a reality, we urge leaders to prioritize technology and internet access for the communities with the greatest unmet need first and to remove every barrier possible to students' continued learning.

### Partnership's Family Survey - Hearing Directly from Families

In order to learn directly about the experiences of families during this time, we conducted phone surveys with 1,000 families in Watts, South Los Angeles and Boyle Heights between March 24, 2020 and April 4, 2020. We know that phone surveys are not fully representative of the families we serve because they tend to represent families who are easier to reach. Nevertheless, the data reveal some important trends in historically underserved communities that complement the findings of a recent Ed Trust-West parent poll on COVID-19 and school closures.<sup>ii</sup> Our respondents reported that:

- 20% don't have access to a computer, laptop or iPad for assignments (37% of families in Watts lack access)
- 16% don't have access to internet or WiFi (18% of families in Watts lack access)
- Among the 16% of respondents who don't have access to internet:
  - 41% didn't know about free WiFi offerings from Comcast, Spectrum and Verizon
  - 15% contacted internet companies to try to get service
- Common concerns of families from survey:
  - Parents have tried accessing free internet service through the providers mentioned, but have faced barriers with service (no one answers the phone, or the companies don't have enough technicians to set up internet)
  - Some families cannot access the internet because providers do not service their area
  - Some parents also have multiple children sharing the devices and/or hotspots, which limits use and makes the internet very slow

Detailed findings from the survey are [attached](#).

### Partnership's Survey of Internet Offers - Testing the Promises of Internet Companies

Prompted by the findings of our family survey, we investigated the offers and support provided by prominent internet companies in Los Angeles. Our staff acted as potential customers in Watts (the neighborhood with the greatest gaps in access) and made 50 calls to internet companies that are promoting special offers.

We found significant discrepancies between what has been promoted and advertised by the internet companies and what callers experienced in trying to sign up for service. Highlights from our findings:

- AT&T is the only provider that provides home internet service throughout the Watts 90002 zip code
- Average wait time on calls to speak with customer service is 20 minutes, and as long as 120 minutes to speak to a representative in Spanish
- Most companies require a social security number to get connected (which many families do not have or feel comfortable sharing), or require a substantial deposit in lieu of a social security number
- "Free trials" require signing up for contracts that require fees after the free trial is complete, or paying significant up-front deposits

Our findings for each internet company can be found in the table below, and in more detail in the [attachment](#).

Company	What They Promoted	What We Found
AT&T	60-day free internet access to qualifying limited income households; for continuing households the rate is \$10/month.	Most callers were told that no free trial is available. For the few who were offered a free trial, they had to sign on for a \$59.99/month offer after the 60 days. Low-income families are being offered a \$10/month plan for 5-10 Mbps, with no free trial available. If customers cannot provide a social security number, a \$99 deposit is required.
Charter Spectrum	Free Spectrum broadband and WiFi access for 60 days to households with students who do not already have a Spectrum broadband subscription.	No home internet service in most of Watts 90002 zip code. For customers where Spectrum service is offered, free trial requires them to sign on for a \$54.99/month offer after the 60 days. Existing customers cannot downgrade their services.
Comcast	60 days free for new customers (Internet Essentials package).	No home internet service available for Watts 90002 zip code. Automated system refers you to website <a href="http://internetessentials.com">internetessentials.com</a> to apply.
Google	Setting up 100,000 WiFi access points for a minimum of 3 months. Donating 4,000 Chromebooks to students across California.	Few details provided on locations for WiFi access points, but focus seems to be on rural areas in California. We found no evidence of any Google-provided WiFi access or devices for students in Watts or anywhere else in Los Angeles.
T-Mobile	Offering 20GB hotspot data for existing customers for the next 60 days.	No home internet service offered. For hotspot offers, they charge an additional \$15 for 2GB to existing customers.
Verizon	Partnering with LAUSD to provide internet access via personal hotspots for all students who lack internet access.	No home internet service for Watts 90002 zip code. Callers who asked about the LAUSD hotspot devices were told by Verizon representatives to contact LAUSD or the child's school to submit a request. For families who did not ask about the offer, Verizon representatives did not mention it and instead suggested families go to a public hotspot.

### Hotspot Distribution

Given the limitations of available offerings from internet providers in Watts and other low-income neighborhoods, the success of LA Unified's planned hotspot distribution (in partnership with Verizon) is vital. LA Unified has asked families to request hotspots through their school, and asked schools to request the number of hotspots they need. Based on the experience of schools in our network, we know that distribution is ongoing and making progress. What is clear is that the need is urgent and great. From our network of schools serving 13,500 students, 2,978 hotspots (22% of total student population) have been requested by schools as of April 13, 2020.

Neighborhood	Estimate of hotspots needed
Watts - 8 Partnership Schools	1,647 (36% of students)
South LA - 4 Partnership Schools	758 (22% of students)
Boyle Heights - 6 Partnership Schools	582 (11% of students)
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,978 (22% of students)</b>

### Recommendations

As efforts to expand internet access and support distance learning continue, we urge state, district and technology leaders to put equity at the forefront. For the sake of our students and their futures, we must:

- **Hold technology companies accountable for ensuring that public relations announcements match up with actual services**
  - Develop and vet implementation plans for services before sharing promotional offers made by technology companies
  - Ensure accountability for delivering accessible services to communities where the need is greatest
  - Ensure there are at least two internet providers for every community
- **Prioritize access for the communities with the greatest unmet need first**
  - Ensure internet companies offer viable services to underserved communities like Watts, South LA and Boyle Heights
  - Distribute hotspots to most underserved communities first
  - Invest in new and ongoing public wireless access points in most underserved communities, particularly in and around high-need schools and public housing developments
  - Make sure that long-term infrastructure investments in high-need communities happen
- **Support schools' technology and safety needs**
  - Support school staff safety in the distribution of technology, providing additional staffing, supplies and alternatives to in-person distribution (e.g. mailing hotspots directly to families)
  - Ensure schools have the technology they need beyond the COVID-19 crisis, so current investments can turn in to long-term resources
- **Simplify processes for families to access internet offers**
  - Target outreach to families of students facing the greatest barriers to ensure all can access the internet and distance learning
  - Clearly distinguish free, short-term COVID-19 offers from those which require ongoing contracts
  - Do not require families to provide sensitive identifying information, such as Social Security Numbers
  - Make customer service and technical assistance easily accessible to families who speak languages besides English and who do not have experience setting up home internet
- **Make federal funds available for equipping students with home internet access**
  - The Federal Communications Commission should allow its beneficiaries to utilize universal service funding to provide home wireless service for students who lack internet access at home
  - Funds are needed for both short-term connectivity and for long-term infrastructure improvements

As plans move forward to connect students and families for distance learning, we urge leaders to prioritize access for the communities with the greatest unmet need first and to remove every barrier possible to students' continued learning. As we deal with the reality that school will be administered from a distance for the foreseeable future, we must ensure that the basic tools for instruction and learning are there for the students most at risk of falling behind.

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<sup>i</sup> USC Annenberg Connected Cities and Inclusive Growth (CCIG) Policy Brief # 5, "[COVID-19 and the Distance Learning Gap](#)," April 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> Education Trust-West, "[California Parent Poll: COVID-19 and School Closures](#)", April 2020.

Partnership for LA Schools - Internet Service Provider Offers		
Provider	Announcements	Sources/Notes
AT&T	<p>2 months free for new customers and suspending all data usage caps until further notice.</p> <p>No termination of service for the next 60 days; will waive late fees for any residential or small business customers because of inability to pay.</p> <p>Access from AT&amp;T program offers new customers 2 months free internet access to qualifying limited income households; for continuing households the rate is \$10/month. AT&amp;T has expanded eligibility to households participating in National School Lunch Program and Head Start.</p>	<p><a href="http://www.internetforallnow.org/get_affordable_internet_today">http://www.internetforallnow.org/get_affordable_internet_today</a></p> <p>- <a href="https://about.att.com/story/2020/covid_19_education.html">https://about.att.com/story/2020/covid_19_education.html</a></p> <p><a href="https://about.att.com/story/2020/distance_learning_family_connections.html">https://about.att.com/story/2020/distance_learning_family_connections.html</a></p>
Charter/Spectrum	<p>Charter will offer free Spectrum broadband and WiFi access for 60 days to households with K-12 and/or college students who do not already have a Spectrum broadband subscription and at any service level up to 100 Mbps. Installation fees are waived for new student households.</p> <p>Charter will partner with school districts to ensure local communities are aware of these tools to help students learn remotely. Charter will continue to offer Spectrum Internet Assist, high speed broadband program to eligible low-income households delivering speeds of 30 Mbps.</p> <p>Charter will open its Wi-Fi hotspots across footprint for public use.</p> <p>To qualify, you must have a student of qualifying age at your service address with remote education needs; have not subscribed to our internet services within the past 30 days</p>	<p><a href="https://www.spectrum.net/support/internet/coronavirus-covid-19-educational-internet-offer">https://www.spectrum.net/support/internet/coronavirus-covid-19-educational-internet-offer</a></p> <p>- <a href="https://corporate.charter.com/newsroom/charter-to-offer-free-access-to-spectrum-broadband-and-wifi-for-60-days-for-new-K12-and-college-student-households-and-more">https://corporate.charter.com/newsroom/charter-to-offer-free-access-to-spectrum-broadband-and-wifi-for-60-days-for-new-K12-and-college-student-households-and-more</a></p>
Comcast/Xfinity	<p>2 months free for new customers (Internal Essentials package)</p> <p>For all new and existing customers, the speed will be increased to 25 Mbps downstream and 3 Mbps upstream. That increase will go into effect for no additional fee and become the new base speed for the program going forward.</p> <p>New customers will also receive 40 hours of Wi-Fi hotspot usage per month</p> <p>No disconnects or late fees</p>	<p><a href="http://www.internetforallnow.org/get_affordable_internet_today">http://www.internetforallnow.org/get_affordable_internet_today</a></p> <p><a href="https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/availableinternetplans.asp">https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/availableinternetplans.asp</a></p> <p><a href="https://www.internetessentials.com/covid19">https://www.internetessentials.com/covid19</a></p>
Google	<p>Setting up 100,000 WiFi access points for rural households for a minimum of 3 months</p> <p>Donating 4,000 Chromebooks to students across CA</p>	<p><a href="https://edsources.org/2020/thousands-of-california-students-to-get-free-wifi-and-chromebooks-for-distance-learning/627823">https://edsources.org/2020/thousands-of-california-students-to-get-free-wifi-and-chromebooks-for-distance-learning/627823</a></p> <p>Tweet from Google's CEO: <a href="https://twitter.com/sundarpichai/status/1245436573946019840">https://twitter.com/sundarpichai/status/1245436573946019840</a></p> <p>- Remains unclear exactly how the CDE will distribute Chromebooks or where WiFi access points will be located</p>
T-mobile	<p>Offering 20GB hotspot data for existing customers for the next 60 days.</p> <p>T-Mobile is temporarily waiving Late fees and Suspend and restore fees for those impacted by COVID-19.</p> <p>(Can't find evidence of free plans for new customers)</p>	<p><a href="https://www.t-mobile.com/news/t-mobile-update-on-covid-19-response?icid=MGPO_TMO_U_CUSTSUPT_Z2739VFSHS9707KGF20085">https://www.t-mobile.com/news/t-mobile-update-on-covid-19-response?icid=MGPO_TMO_U_CUSTSUPT_Z2739VFSHS9707KGF20085</a></p>
Verizon	<p>Verizon is partnering with LAUSD to provide internet access to all students, but there is not a lot of specificity about plans (see press releases at right).</p> <p>Deal includes LAUSD's \$100M investment in Verizon to cover cost for company "to provide internet service to needy families in the district". Deal terms have not been released.</p> <p>Outside of this deal, in general, existing customers may complete a "short form" to let them know they're experiencing hardship because of COVID-19. Once submitted, account will be protected from late fees and service termination through May 13, 2020.</p>	<p><a href="https://achieve.lausd.net/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&amp;DomainID=4&amp;ModuleInstanceID=4466&amp;ViewID=6446EE88-D30C-497E-9316-3F8874B3E108&amp;RenderLoc=0&amp;FlexDataID=87160&amp;PageID=1">https://achieve.lausd.net/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&amp;DomainID=4&amp;ModuleInstanceID=4466&amp;ViewID=6446EE88-D30C-497E-9316-3F8874B3E108&amp;RenderLoc=0&amp;FlexDataID=87160&amp;PageID=1</a></p> <p><a href="https://www.verizon.com/about/news/verizon-provide-unlimited-internet-lausd">https://www.verizon.com/about/news/verizon-provide-unlimited-internet-lausd</a></p> <p><a href="https://laist.com/2020/03/23/lausd_la_county_schools_shutdown_extended.php">https://laist.com/2020/03/23/lausd_la_county_schools_shutdown_extended.php</a></p>

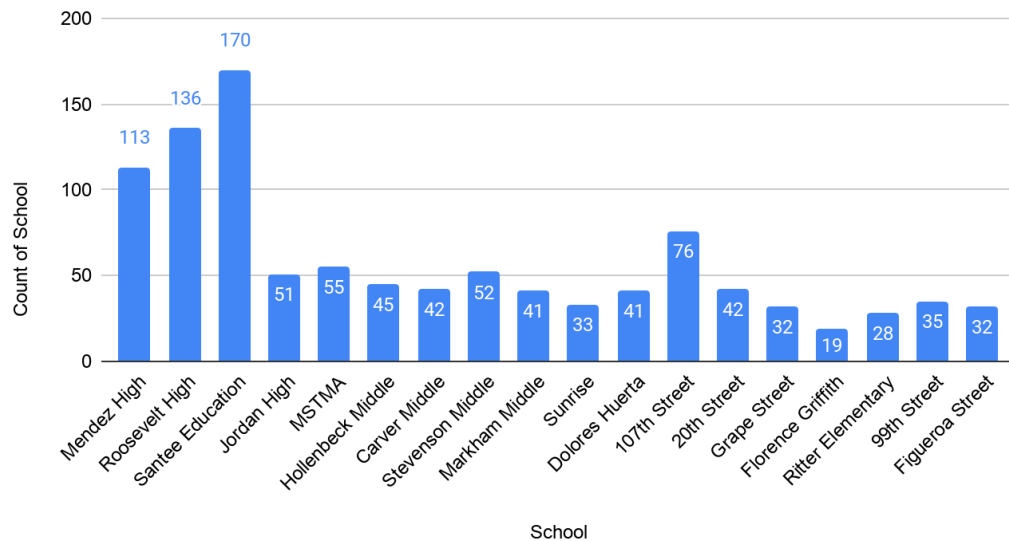
Partnership for LA Schools - Findings on Internet Service Provider Offers

Provider	What was the range for wait time to speak with a representative?	Does service extend into the Watts area (zip code 90002)?	Do they require Social Security Number?	Is a free trial available?	How much will service cost after the free trial is over?	Cost for installation?	What is the best offer available for low-income families in Watts (excluding the free trial)?	What were challenges and concerns with their best offer?
AT&T	7 - 60 minutes	Yes	Yes	No	\$59.99/month	\$99 deposit, if no SSN.	\$10/month, if qualified. 12MB	There is no free trial offered. Instead, those families are being offered a \$10/month plan with 12MB. And if customers cannot provide a SSN, a \$99 deposit is required.
Charter Spectrum	3 - 15 minutes	Limited service in Watts	Yes	Yes	\$54.99/month	Waived	\$17.99/month, if qualified. 250MB	Most callers reported no service for 90002 zip code. No significant assistance for existing customers with LAUSD students in household.
Comcast	3 - 120 minutes	No	N/A	N/A	N/A	Waived	\$9.95/month, if qualified. 25MB	Long wait times (120 minutes) to speak to Spanish representatives. Automated system refers you to website internetessentials.com to apply (wait for qualification response). No service for Watts 90002 zip code.
T-mobile	3 - 35 minutes	Yes	Yes	No	No free trial	N/A	Additional \$15 for existing customers. 2GB	They charge an additional \$15 for 2GB to existing customers, not enough for students to do their schoolwork. Families already struggling with cellphone bill cannot afford an additional \$15.
Verizon	3 - 20 minutes	Yes via LAUSD Hotspot Devices	No	N/A	N/A	No	LAUSD Hotspot Devices. 15GB	Families who know about the LAUSD hotspot devices were told by Verizon representatives to contact LAUSD or the child's school to submit a request. For families who did not know about the offer, Verizon representatives did not mention it and instead suggested families go to a nearby public hotspot.

**Partnership for LA Schools Family Needs Assessment Survey - March/April 2020**

In order to learn directly about the experiences of families during this time, Partnership staff conducted phone surveys with 1,043 families in Watts, South Los Angeles and Boyle Heights between March 24, 2020 and April 4, 2020.

**Responses by School**

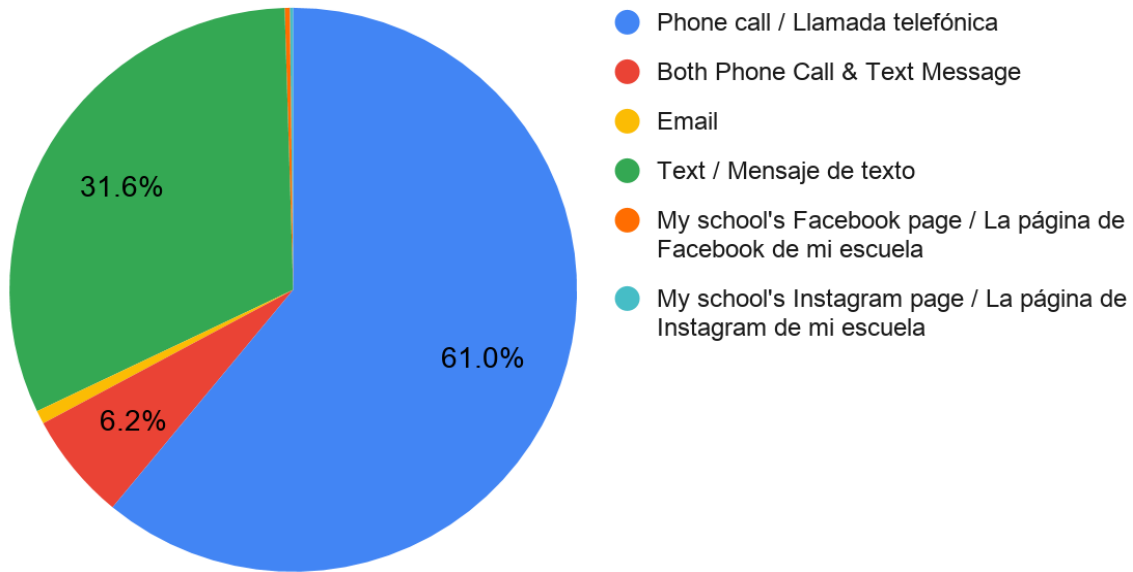


Total Responses: 1044

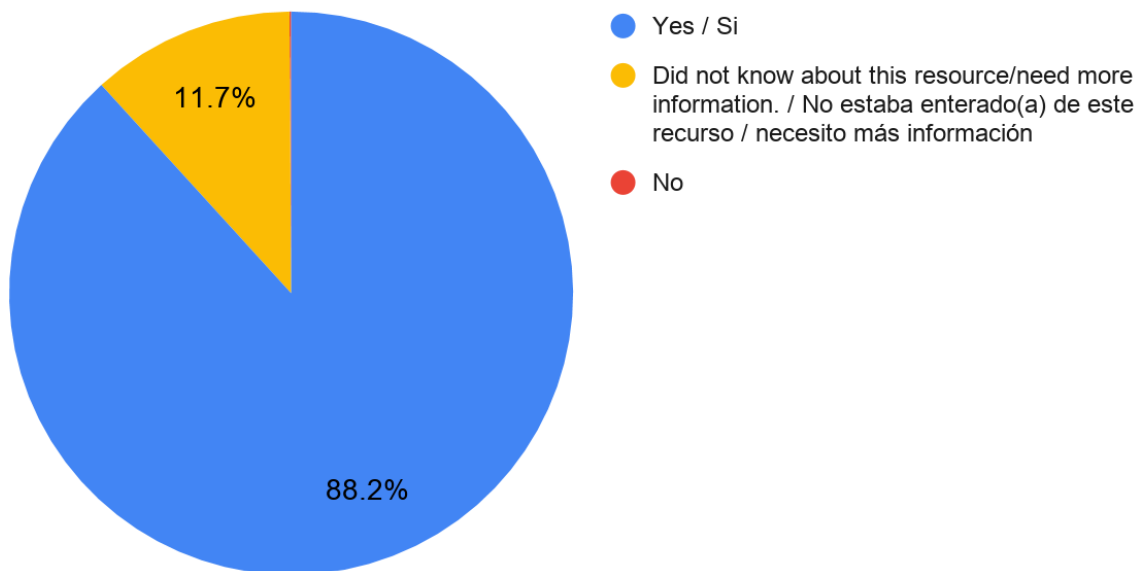
**Questions**

1. What is the best way for us to get in communication with you about any updates?
2. Are you aware of the LAUSD Grab and Go Center program that offers free meals for students and families? 2b. If so, have you visited a Grab and Go Center to access its services?
3. Does your student have a computer, laptop, or iPad to access school assignments? If so, is it personal or school-issued?
4. Do you have access to internet or wifi?
5. If you don't have internet access/wifi, have you tried calling Comcast, Verizon, or Spectrum for free access?
6. Does your student need to print materials? If so, do you have printer access?
7. Does your student have necessary school supplies to complete their work? (pencils, paper, etc.)
8. Have your student's teachers communicated with you or your student since school closed?
9. How might we support your child's transition to online instruction?
10. Are there any additional academic supports that you believe your student could benefit from?

1. What is the best way for us to get in communication with you about any updates?

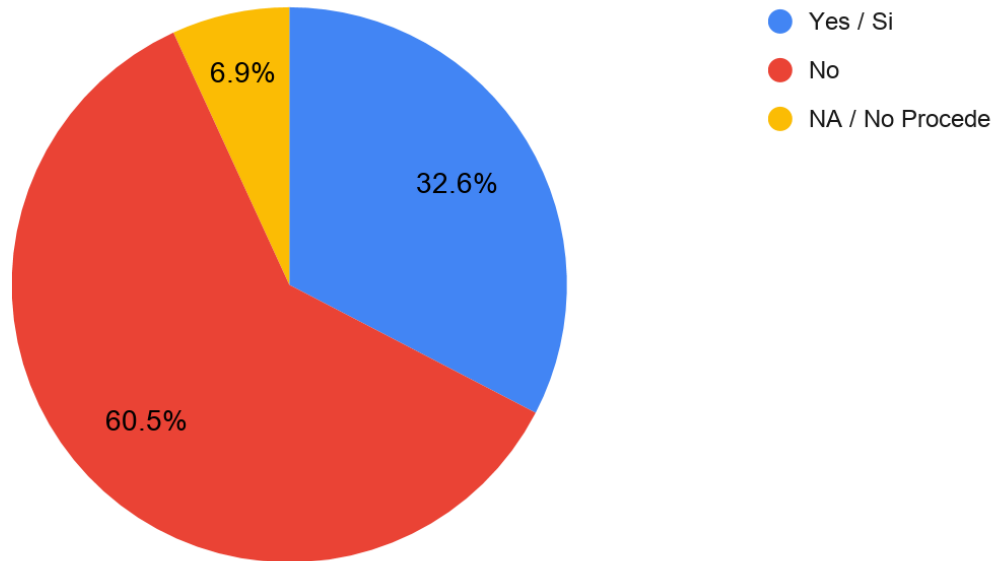


2. Are you aware of the LAUSD Grab and Go Center program that offers free meals for students and families?

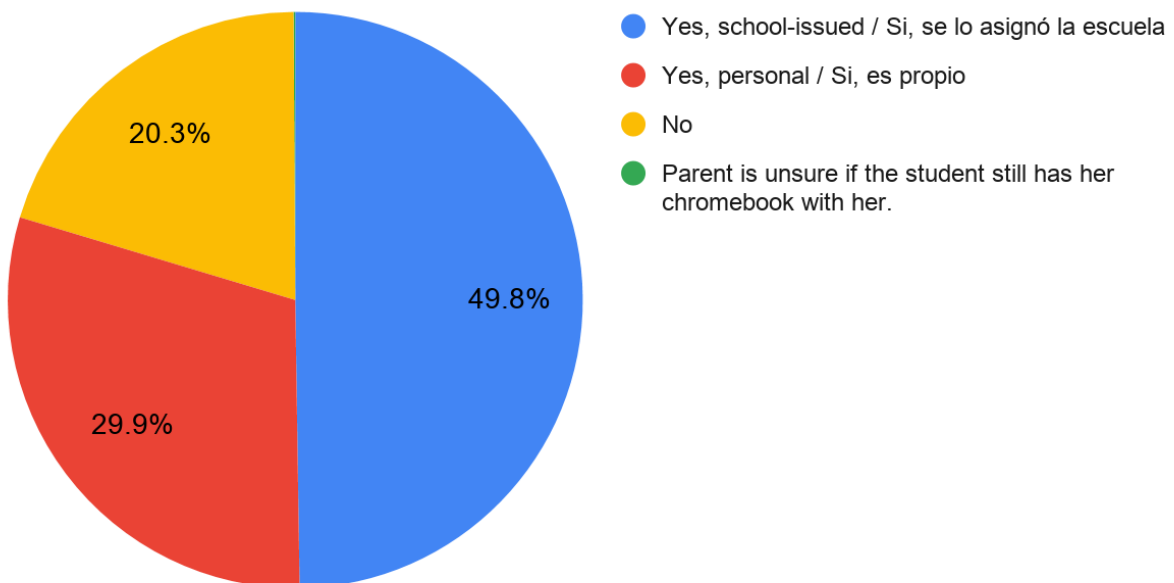




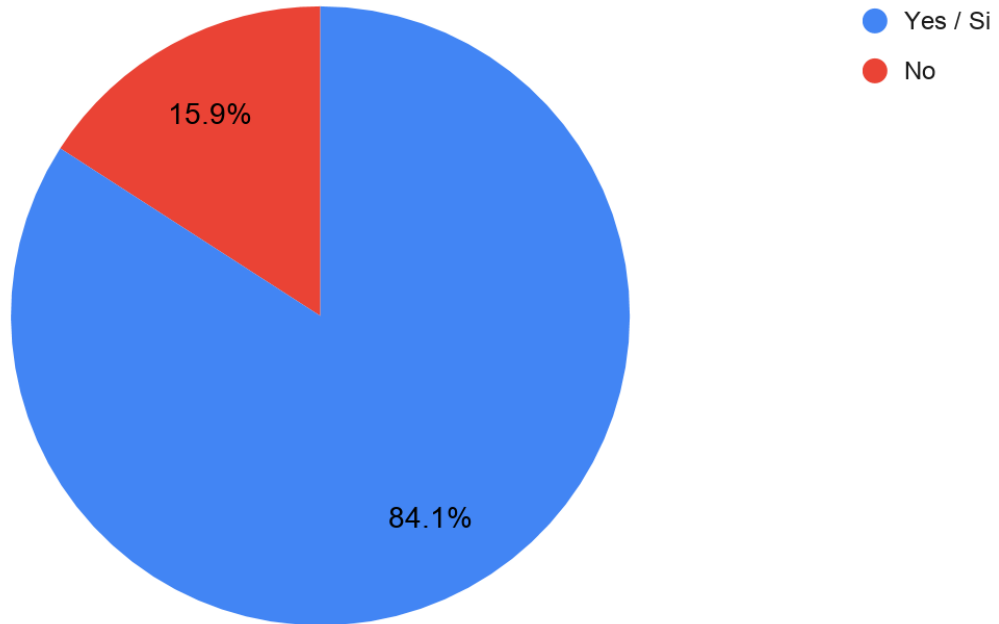
2b. If so, have you visited a Grab and Go Center to access its services?



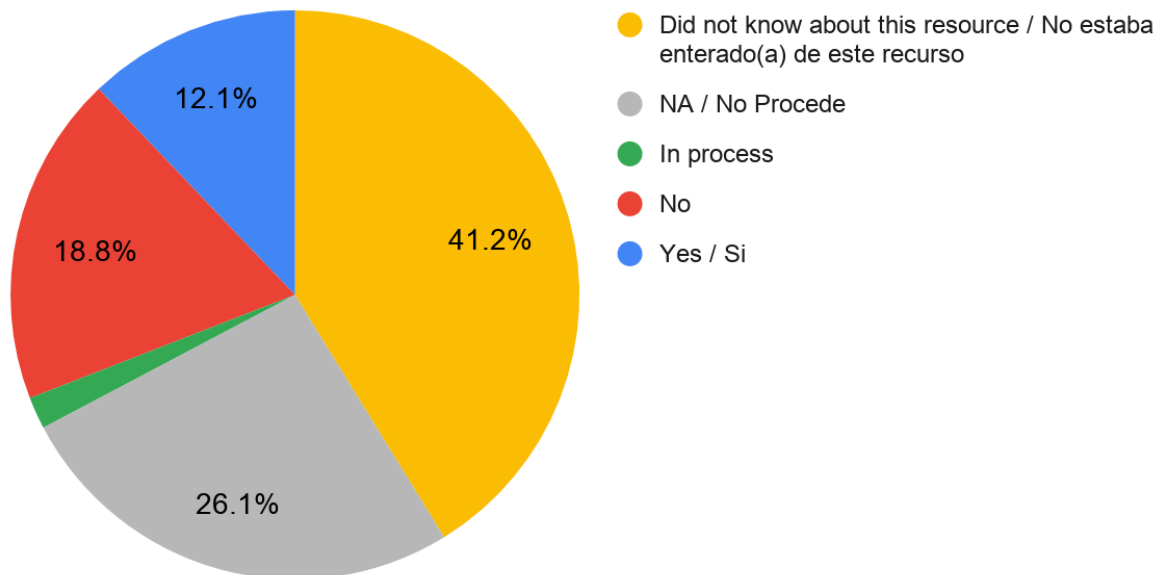
3. Does your student have a computer, laptop, or iPad to access school assignments? If so, is it personal or school-issued?



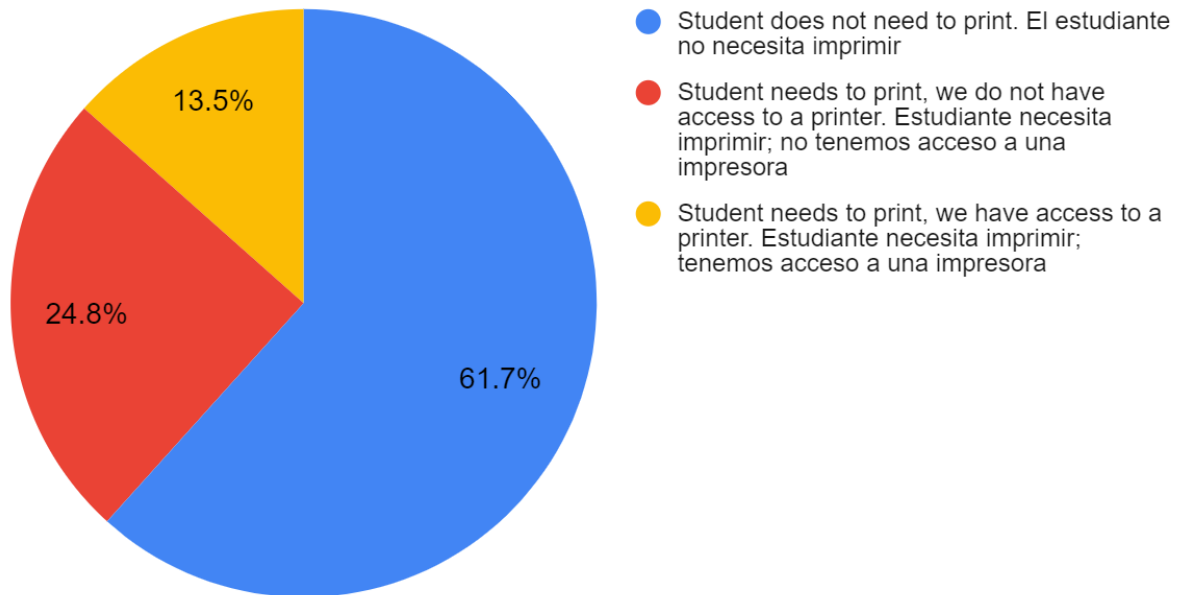
4. Do you have access to internet or wifi?



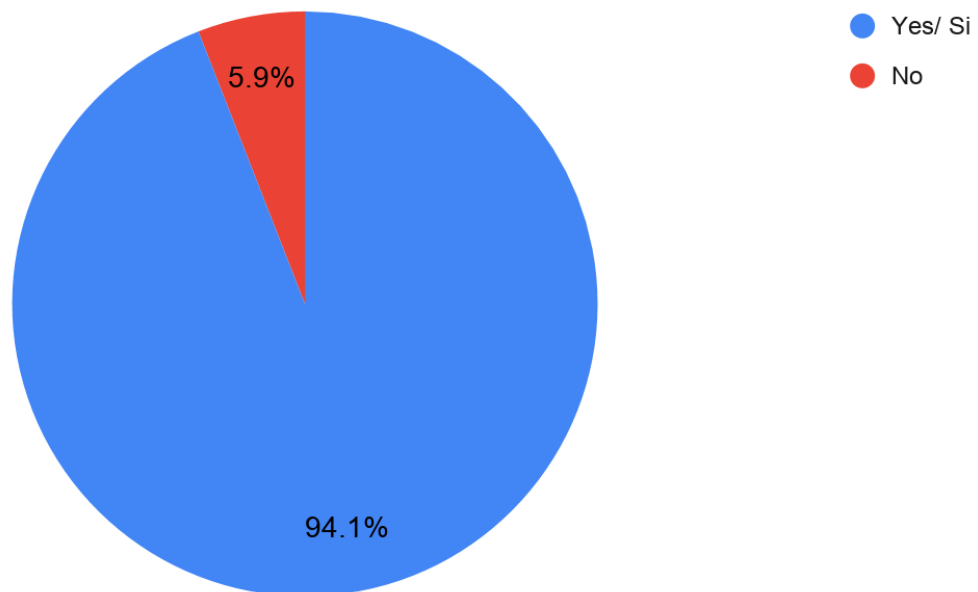
5. If you don't have internet access/wifi, have you tried calling Comcast, Verizon, or Spectrum for free access?



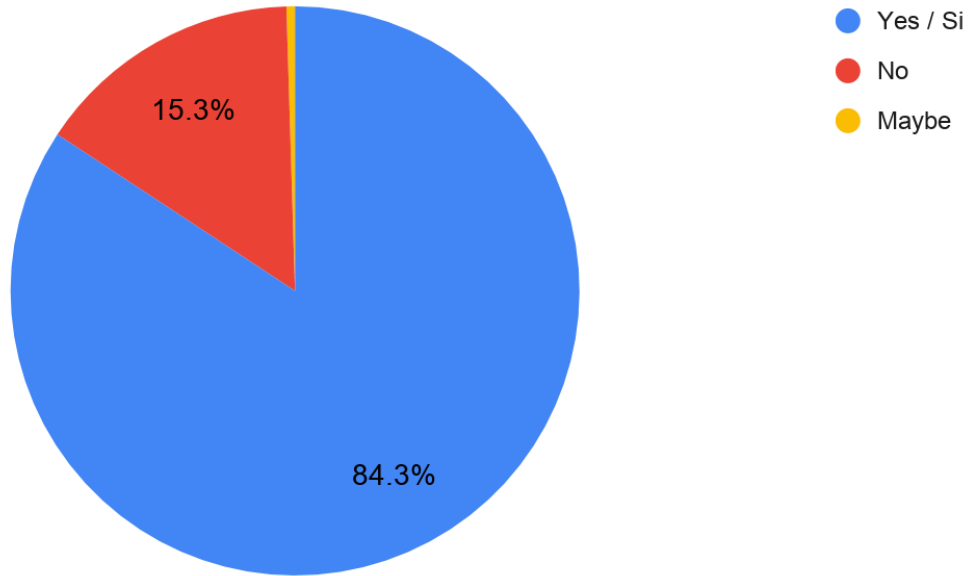
6. Does your student need to print materials? If so, do you have printer access?



7. Does your student have necessary school supplies to complete their work? (pencils, paper, etc.)



8. Have your student's teachers communicated with you or your student since school closed?



<b>Prominent Themes Across Responses</b>			
	<b>Tech</b>	<b>Grab and Go</b>	<b>Academic</b>
<b>Resources Needed</b>	Computers, internet access, tech support (for operating devices and for accessing platforms)	More accessible centers (some are too far for families without transportation)	tutoring, social-emotional support, math support, paper/notebooks/pencils, printer access, resources for SPED students, grade-level books, instruments for music class/art supplies for art class
<b>Parent Concerns</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parents have tried accessing free internet service through the providers mentioned, but the companies are impacted with requests (no one answers the phone, or they don't have enough technicians to set up internet).</li> <li>- Some families cannot access internet because free providers do not service their area.</li> <li>- Some students received school laptops that are not working and they are unsure of how to proceed.</li> <li>- Some students have been unable to access the online platforms and parents have little-to-no tech knowledge and cannot help them.</li> <li>- Some parents are also concerned because they have multiple children sharing the devices which limits use, or they have multiple children on separate devices using the same hotspot which makes the internet very slow.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Grab and Go center is not giving them the amount of meals they need (big family/many children in the household).</li> <li>- Some parents indicated that they have not accessed a center because: they were scared to go outside, they did not know where the nearest center was, they were unsure if they had to take their children, or they had no transportation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parents would like teachers to communicate with them as well. They indicated they'd like to know if their student is keeping up with assignments.</li> <li>- Parents worry that their student does not have enough assignments to work on and keep busy.</li> <li>- There is a concern about teachers who have sent packets of work home but have not been able to reach out yet.</li> </ul>
<b>Other Needs/Questions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Resources for eviction notice?</li> <li>- One or both parents lost</li> </ul>		

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School	2019-20 Actual	Families Surveyed	% Sample Size
<b>107th Total</b>	<b>881</b>	76	11.6
<b>Huerta</b>	<b>361</b>	41	8.8
<b>Sunrise total</b>	<b>314</b>	33	9.5
<b>Figueroa</b>	<b>454</b>	32	14.2
<b>99th</b>	<b>592</b>	35	16.9
<b>Ritter</b>	<b>348</b>	28	12.4
<b>Joyner Total</b>	<b>499</b>	19	26.3
<b>Grape Street</b>	<b>450</b>	32	14.1
<b>20th Total</b>	<b>613</b>	42	14.6
<b>Carver</b>	<b>732</b>	42	17.4
<b>Hollenbeck Total</b>	<b>1135</b>	45	25.2
<b>Stevenson Total</b>	<b>1097</b>	52	21.1
<b>Markham Total</b>	<b>701</b>	41	17.1
<b>Mendez</b>	<b>1010</b>	113	8.9
<b>Roosevelt</b>	<b>1342</b>	136	9.9
<b>Roosevelt HS Magnet</b>	<b>571</b>	55	10.4
<b>Jordan</b>	<b>538</b>	51	10.5
<b>Santee</b>	<b>1783</b>	170	10.5