

Ensuring learning opportunities for all

In 2016 the United Nations declared that the internet was a basic human right. It plays a critical role in education, health and civil participation. Certainly COVID-19 has accelerated the use of digital technologies in our schools but what next? This article explores the ways in which digital access has impacted on education in the Greater Christchurch region.

We have always known digital technologies are not evenly accessible. The COVID-19 Lockdown period amplified the inequity of access for learners – in schools, tertiary institutions and businesses. It also highlighted the importance of digital technologies to support personalisation and collaboration. During lockdown teachers and schools rose to the challenge and significant progress was made in a short timeframe.

Schools dealt with digital access in many different ways. Some created a simplified, mirror image of their timetables, essentially using traditional structures in an online space. This approach was particularly difficult for students with less access to technology in the home. For families with only one device the expectation that a learner would be online for continuous periods created huge stress, with other family members subsequently having limited access. In other cases, where a parent required the device to work from home, resources were stretched.

Other schools managed to strike a healthy balance between giving some structure to learning, while enabling students to pace themselves. This approach provided students with more flexibility, the opportunity to self-manage and to meet family commitments.

Many Canterbury schools are exploring how this can continue now schools have reopened. We expect to hear that schools are trialling new approaches to timetabling, start

times, blended approaches to learning and student self-management. 2021 needs to build on this thinking.

However, we have a major issue that must be addressed. The stark reality is that we have a significant number of students who have no internet access at home, limited data for learning online and no device to use. During lockdown this made it difficult for some families to maintain an ongoing relationship with schools and learning, magnifying the inequities that already exist in our community. Unless we address this digital inequity together, we will not thrive as a city, or as a nation.

The New Zealand Ministry of Education has been working with schools to provide students with access to digital devices and internet access where there was none in the home. The Greater Christchurch Schools' Network (GCSN) is also running initiatives to help reduce the digital divide. Schools have been supporting their own, but that is not enough.

If all learners do not have access we are all impacted as a society. This means that as a city we need to identify ways our young people can become connected and future-ready. Schools are doing their bit but a collaborative approach across agencies, businesses, organisations and communities is necessary. Let's not bury our heads in the sand and think it's not our problem. ●



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