

Education Grantmaking During COVID-19: Funding Learning from Home

In March 2020, a pandemic brought traditional in-classroom learning to a halt for more than 55 million students in the U.S. Teachers and families, in most cases, found themselves scrambling to provide remote learning at short notice.

What may have seemed like a fast solution, moving to online instruction, has highlighted challenges for many learners. Philanthropists across the country quickly stepped up to help fill the gaps. What are grantmakers funding? Who is at greatest risk? What should funders be mindful of moving forward?

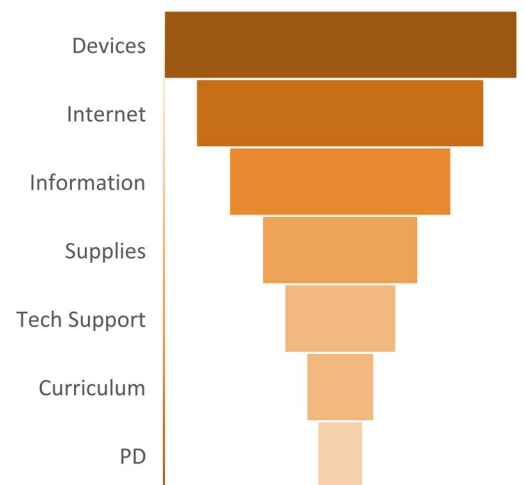
What are grantmakers funding?

Education funding is still rare; online learning is mentioned in about 60% of education-focused funds. Grantmakers for Education reviewed rapid response funds from three sources: Grantmakers for Education's members, Candid's rapid response database, and Giving Compass and National Center for Family Philanthropy's rapid response list on May 19, 2020. Of more than 800 unduplicated funds, 70 list some support for K-12 and/or postsecondary education as at least one purpose of the fund. Of those funds, 41 specifically mention support for online learning.*

Funds for online learning cover a variety of supports, with most focusing on technology. In order of keyword frequency, grantmakers are funding:**

- Devices such as computers, tablets, printers, routers for teachers and/or students.
- Internet connectivity such as hotspots, Wi-Fi and broadband.
- Information and best practices on remote teaching and learning.
- School supplies; e-books.
- Technical support for students, families, teachers and/or school staff.
- Curriculum.
- Professional development/training to effectively teach and learn remotely.

Types of Support



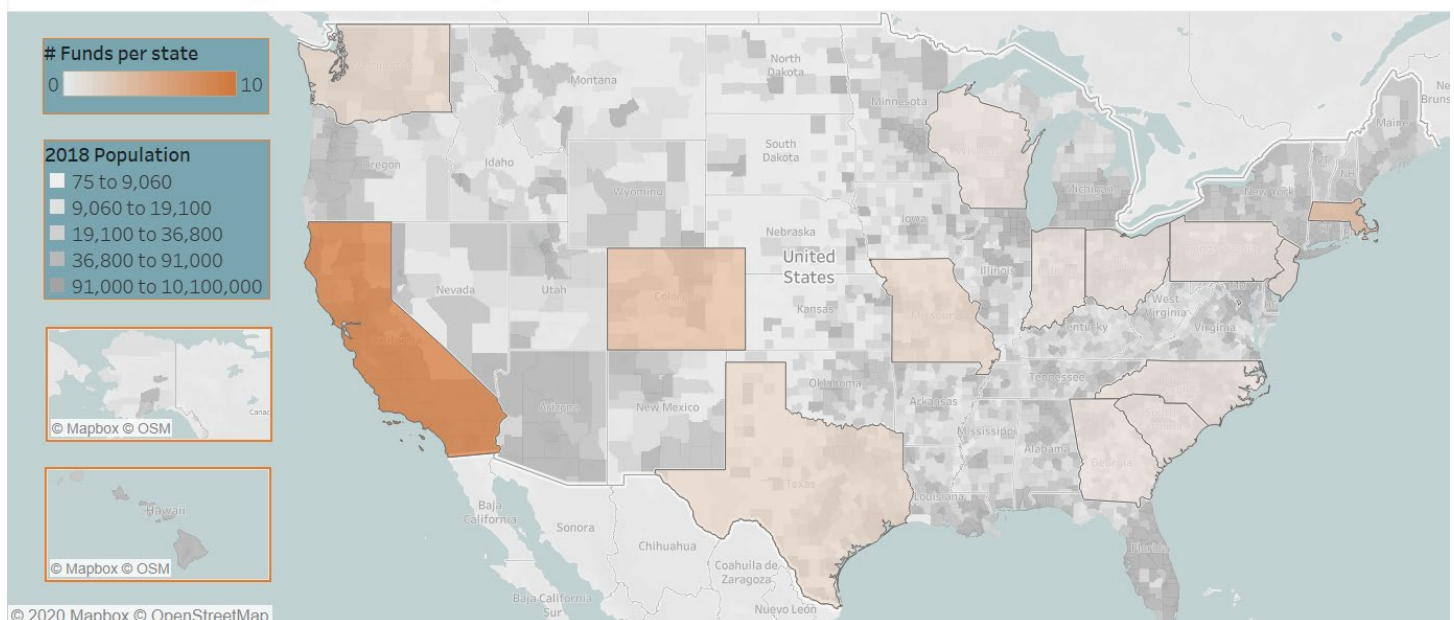
How have grantmakers informed their funding priorities?

Given the urgent timeline, funders had to make quick decisions about what to fund. Two members that had prior experience making grants to support innovation, including blended and online learning, share what informed their decision-making. Both are nonprofit education organizations that also provide grant funding.

[The Mind Trust](#), an organization that launches innovative schools, supports educators and engages with communities to create high quality education in Indianapolis, surveyed the school districts their jointly supported fund, the \$2.6 million [Indianapolis E-Learning Fund](#), would cover. Results showed an overwhelming need for connectivity, so providing hotspots became a primary focus for the first round of grants. A second round will focus on solving the issue at scale by supporting the buildout of a private internet network for city schools. The fund will also support online learning strategies and a statewide online learning lab.

[Future of School](#), a national organization that focuses on new models of teaching and learning through technology, business and innovation, used existing partnerships to inform their approximately \$75,000 [Remote Learning Relief Fund](#). In March, the organization connected with current organizational grantees to determine the real-time supports and shifts that would be most helpful. Future of School also interviewed current and former teacher grantees to learn what they thought would be most helpful. In this way, they were able to tailor the funds to support teachers in creating engaging, personalized online learning experiences and access to existing customizable content, as well as technology for teachers and students.

Online Learning Funds in Response to COVID-19



Where is the greatest risk?

Specific student populations are facing extra challenges with the change to online learning. Of the 41 funds addressing online learning, just five funds mentioned an intent to address digital equity.

Rural areas. According to the Federal Communications Commission, while rural broadband access is growing, [millions of rural and tribal communities lack access](#). Just three of the 41 online learning rapid response funds we identified specify that at least a portion of their dollars are going to rural or tribal communities. Although eight funds are national in scope, none of those identify a rural or tribal focus. The map above shows the states where 33 funds are based (excludes national funds) and U.S. population density.

Low-income communities. In a recent [ParentsTogether survey](#), parents report one quarter of children at the lowest income level are receiving no online instruction. This is five times as many as those at the \$50,000-\$99,000 income level and more than ten times higher than families who make \$100,000 and above. Beyond instruction, for many low-income families, school sites are now challenged to provide important supports that many low-income families rely on, like nutrition, counseling and health care.

Unhoused or displaced students. Prior to the pandemic, the unhoused student population was at its highest level on record and graduation rates were 12% lower than low-income students. Education is particularly important for this population since failing to graduate indicates a high risk for adult homelessness. The challenges for online learning are immense, including difficulty in accessing internet connections and finding appropriate places to perform schoolwork and attend classes.

Racial inequities. Before the pandemic, the [average achievement gap](#) between white students and African American and Latino students was two years, with estimates suggesting large increases. African American and Native American families are experiencing the highest rates of infection and death from COVID-19, implicating high levels of stress which can impair and detract from learning. In addition, as of 2019, just [66% of African American and 61% of Latino adults had broadband service](#); about 58% had a computer.

What should education funders be mindful of moving forward?



Funding online education will continue to be important. With federal stimulus funds for education still uncertain, a vaccine for COVID-19 over an unknown horizon, and school districts likely struggling from large budget shortfalls in the near term, online learning will likely play a large role through the 2020-2021 school year, and blended learning may be here to stay. Most funding so far has focused on internet access and devices, however within the additional context of racial justice, funding should also include:

- **Teacher professional development.** Teachers need help determining how to deliver their content online. Training must integrate professional learning on cultural competence and incorporating anti-racist strategies.
- **Culturally sensitive online curriculum.** Curriculum should reflect the unique environment of online learning, the unique needs of learners when learning from home, and careful consideration of the racial implications of the material.



Research on what we're learning is invaluable for moving forward smartly and intentionally. Grantmakers for Education members have started this important work. For example, [Overdeck Family Foundation](#), The Mind Trust and Future of School have invested in teacher or learner surveys. [Spencer Foundation](#) is granting funds for research on the impacts of school closures and the fast move to remote learning.



Policy change is essential. The impact of this period of disruption will be larger than any grant funding, no matter how generous, can address. We can expect deep cuts to education funding, which in past recessions led to widening gaps, many of which still have not been recovered. In order to support learners who have the most to lose from these cuts, predominantly low-income students and students of color, philanthropists need to work collaboratively with stakeholders. Their joint influence on state and national policy to provide adequate and stable long-term education funding, codify equitable educational practices and expand broadband access could make all the difference.

This forced experiment is not over and we are quickly on the way to navigating a 2020-21 school year of unknowns. Education funders will step forward to address student needs as best they can, and must be prepared for a school year that looks different from any we've seen before. This is an opportune time for the education funding community to become well-versed in the world of online learning and all the supports required to do it well and equitably.

*Other rapid response funds may include support for online learning in some form even if not explicitly mentioned in their fund descriptions.

**This only includes funds that explicitly mention these types of support. Many descriptions are broad, and likely cover one or more of these areas.