The Norwalk Hour
Sunday September 17, 2017 | Since 1871 | www.TheHour.com | Volume 145, Edition 260 | $2.50

CENSUS DATA

Bridging the digital divide

Many poor families lack home internet access

By R.A. Schuetz

NORWALK — Every morning in Beth Olson's classroom at Rowayton Elementary School, the third-graders come in, unpack their backpacks and choose their seats for the day.

Then starts what Olson calls morning work. Some students pull out a book; others do math exercises. And students who had web-based homework, but no internet access at home, pick up a laptop and begin last night's assignment.

"We survey the parents so we can see if they have internet access at home," Olson said. "And if they don't, we provide another avenue to complete the assignment."

Olson said she usually has one or two students a year without internet access out of her class of 22. She's one of two tech coaches at the school, and sometimes creates homework assignments on Google Classroom, which allows students to view a prompt and respond to it using one of Google's apps.

When this happens, she offers her students a choice: They can complete the assignment on paper or find times to work on it during the school day, such as during morning work or the after-school program.

Internet has become increasingly pervasive in today's society — recently released

See Census on A4

Household internet access

Many poor Norwalk families still lack access

Income	Population w/o Internet
Less than $20,000	37.4%
$20,000 to $74,999	9.4%
$75,000 or more	3.4%
Ethnicity	
White	2.9%
Black/African American	7.3%

Source: 2016 American Community Survey

CENSUS

From page A1

census data shows that 97 percent of people in Norwalk have web access at home. However, the lack of access disproportionately impacts people below the poverty line and minorities. The 2016 American Community Survey estimated 37 percent of people in Norwalk whose income is below $20,000 do not have internet, as well as 7 percent of people who reported their race as black only. Estimates were not given for people of races other than black and white.

"It's called the digital divide," said Ralph Valenzisi, chief of technology, innovations and partnerships at Norwalk Public Schools.

While that divide is handled deftly within Olson's classroom, NPS Chief Academic Officer Michael Conner said addressing the problem outside of the classroom was important as well.

He pointed to programs such as Achieve3000 and MyON, which recognize students' strengths and weaknesses over time and begin to offer personalized lessons. "You're going to start seeing artificial intelligence and adaptive software become more prevalent," Conner said.

He said such programs can effectively extend the school day so that learning continues at home. "At home, they can continue the exercises they need to work on."

The extra practice could make a difference for a student behind in school, but such programs are only available to families with internet access. "So I think it's a critical necessity to close this technology gap," Conner said.

The problem is one that has led public libraries and NPS to look for innovative solutions.

Library sees boost in public internet use

Sherelle Harris, the assistant director of the Norwalk Public Library System, sees many students coming in to use the computers. In fact, internet access was so important to library patrons that the system began checking out hot spots for people to take home with them.

"I think our director

R.A. Schuetz / Hearst Connecticut Media

Third-grade students use Chromebooks in Beth Olson's Rowayton Elementary School classroom on Friday afternoon.

really understands Norwalk's economics and socioeconomics," said Harris, referring to Norwalk Public Library Director Christine Bradley. "She understands there's a great need for something like that."

According to Harris, the hot spots are in high demand. "They barely stay on the shelf."

"We have such high use of the computers here and the hot spots," agreed Tom Shadlich, the director of technology at South Norwalk Public Library said. "There are segments of the population that don't have internet."

The number of people using the internet at Norwalk libraries has been growing. Some use the public desktops, while others bring in their own devices and use the Wi-Fi, which is consistent with census data — more people in Norwalk have computers than have internet.

Library computers provide not only internet — they also have learning software. Some programs, such as Rosetta Stone, can be accessed remotely from a library card-holder's home computer.

When asked whether she thought the digital divide was a problem, she sat back to consider. "Depends on which day you ask me," she said with a laugh.

On the one hand, she is a proponent of learning through reading and cautious about too much screen time.

"But technology is such a big part of our everyday lives and certainly the way of the future," she said. "I can see where the gaps occur between those who have access to tech and those who don't."

Possible public wifi in neighborhoods

Harris also said she had been talking with NPS officials about other ways to bring internet to areas without much access.

The Board of Education has sent a survey home with students that includes two questions very similar to the ones on the census: whether families have a computer and whether they have internet.

At the Sept. 19 meeting next Tuesday, the board will decide whether to form an advisory group on technology to analyze the resulting data and come up with a plan for how to address issues with access.

"For example, we will be able to make a heat map of internet access in Norwalk and compare it to a map of where kids are reading on grade level," said NPS technology chief Valenzisi. "We'll be able to find correlations on where are the gaps so we can figure out how to address them outside of the classroom."

Valenzisi said organizing the data would be the foundation for forming a plan to address digital inequity. But possible solutions may include hot spots that students without internet could take home with them or public wifi in certain areas.

"You know there are disparities," said Conner. "You hear about the achievement gap, the preparation gap. But underlying those is the opportunity gap. We have to be able to bridge and close the opportunity gap, and being able to access technology at home is part of that."

"We need to get the data organized in a way where we can start analyzing," said Valenzisi. "I think that's the first step."