

SCHOOLS

Newark Charter Schools Helping Families Transition Into Virtual Classrooms

Education Department says it has distributed 175,000 laptops, iPads and Chromebooks to students



Volunteers distribute laptops at KIPP Thrive & Bold, a charter school in Newark, N.J., on Wednesday.

PHOTO: LEE HAWKINS/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By *Lee Hawkins*

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NEWARK, N.J.—With novel coronavirus raging, administrators and teachers nationwide are rushing to find alternative ways to deliver lessons to students, forcing urban schools like KIPP Thrive & Bold Academy in Newark, N.J., to provide computers and wireless hotspots to families that don't have them.

That reality made for a frantic day at the school Tuesday, as its parking lot and hallways bustled with dozens of masked-and-gloved teachers, nurses and volunteers, all there to help the KIPP students in Newark transition to remote learning.

Operated by the Knowledge Is Power Program, America's largest network of charter schools, KIPP New Jersey runs 14 schools in Camden, N.J., and Newark. A survey from KIPP New Jersey found that between 50% and 60% of its Newark students didn't have computers or Wi-Fi. KIPP

New Jersey rounded up Chromebooks it was already using at some of its other schools to keep students working while the school planned the remote program.

“We have had families sign up for computers and teachers will be following up with every student and family to make sure that they...have technology at home,” said Gabriella DiFilippo, chief operating officer for KIPP New Jersey, which serves 6,700 students across Camden, Newark and in Miami.

KIPP New Jersey is one of thousands of institutions—especially in urban and rural areas—that are shifting to remote learning even as high percentages of students don’t own the needed equipment. For example, roughly 300,000 of New York City’s 1.1 million students said they needed computers, according to school officials. The Department of Education said Monday that it had already distributed 175,000 laptops, iPads and Chromebooks to students, and the rest would be shipped “in the coming weeks.”

But with programs already under way this week, some experts warned that the achievement gaps schools are striving to close could be worsened by delayed access or poorly executed plans or instruction.

“We’re going to do everything in our power to not have that happen,” Ms. DiFilippo said, adding that KIPP—which primarily serves minority and low-income students—wants to keep improving upon its consistent progress.

About 88% of KIPP’s students in Newark are African-American, and 5% are Hispanic, while its students in Camden are 56% African-American and 34% Hispanic. About 95% of KIPP New Jersey students graduate. About 77% of them attend college.

“Our students have been outperforming the districts, and in some cases, outperforming the state averages on the state tests,” Ms. DeFilippo said. “We are doing this work every day to make sure that the achievement gap disappears among our kids.”

But she conceded that if school doesn’t resume this year, four months without face-to-face instruction would be “challenging.”

“It’s our duty and responsibility to make sure...that no one falls through the cracks,” she said.

New York City schools switched to remote learning Monday, prompting Department of Education Chancellor Richard Carranza to call for “flexibility and patience.”

“We are literally flying the plane as we’re building the plane,” he said, in a press conference Monday. “So, not everything is going to go 100 [percent] as we plan, but that’s OK because we’ll figure it out together.”

KIPP has taken the same approach.

On Tuesday morning at KIPP Thrive & Bold, two uniformed officers, staff and volunteers handed out 2,732 disinfected Chromebooks, all wrapped carefully in plastic bags, advising parents to refrain from opening the packages for at least three days.

Tinesha Jones, whose daughter is a sixth grader at KIPP's TEAM Academy in Newark, has stayed in close contact with teachers via text and calls. "Parents have to get on the ball and reach out to their kids' teachers," she said.

"It is very difficult," she said, but added that the situation has also been eased by cable companies that have offered free Wi-Fi to families that don't have internet connections.

The schools will handle all class work and grading on Google Classroom, and each teacher will also record daily class videos. They aim to provide a very clear set of daily and weekly guidelines for parents and students, Ms. DiFilippo said.

"If we are seeing a student who's not checking in with attendance or the parent who's not responsive, we will make sure that we get in touch with that family to ensure that we can support them," she said.

Since about 122 KIPP New Jersey students are homeless, and the vast majority of the state's students receive free or reduced lunches, the school is also distributing daily meals, which are open to non-KIPP students across Newark and Camden.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

If novel coronavirus has required you to switch to remote learning, how has the experience worked out so far? Join the conversation below.

Ms. DiFilippo said the schools are working to accommodate special circumstances by delivering food to children whose parents are experiencing hardships or are health-care workers who can't be home to prepare meals. KIPP is also willing to offer face-to-face technical support for families that may need help with technology. But social-distancing guidelines could complicate in-person meetings.

"We haven't had to do it yet," Ms. DiFilippo said, adding that some of it could be done remotely. "In a case where we need to provide support in the home, we'll make sure we put [safety] protocols in place."

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