

K-12 Collection – Blog Post

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A Journal of the Plague Year: An Archive of COVID-19

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Network Not Available: Rural Students Stymied by Technological Inaccessibility During COVID-19

While companies like Apple, Google, and Facebook frantically worked to develop and profit off the latest software and newest technology, K-12 students in nearby counties lacked the essential devices and connectivity needed to attend school virtually. Just over one-hundred miles from the wealth and glamour of Silicon Valley, students at Princeton Joint Unified School District in Colusa County, California went months without functional distance learning. As K-12 schools nationwide prepare to resume online classes in the coming weeks, it is necessary to address the technological needs of remote students and recognize the ever-widening rural opportunity gap. Political indecisiveness and bureaucratic red tape that overlooks the unique challenges faced by rural communities holds students behind their suburban and urban counterparts.

These rural stories are now being told through [A Journal of the Plague Year](#), a crowdsourced collection of COVID-19 pandemic experiences. Within the archive, the K-12 Collection documents teachers, students, administrators, and parents' daily experiences that provide historical insight into the unprecedented number of campus closures. Stories have poured in from places like Eau Claire, Wisconsin, Baltimore, Maryland, Meridian, Idaho, and Carlsbad, California. While geographically disparate, the archive tells stories of struggle, disappointment, and success. Rural students' experiences, however, stand out in stark contrast.

‘Campuses Closed’: Looking Back

When Princeton Joint Unified School District closed its doors on March 16, 2020, to prevent the spread of COVID-19, online classes did not begin for another three weeks. Students without personal devices received Chromebooks that showed every bit of wear and tear from six years of classroom use. Wi-Fi on school campuses was made publicly available, but for students living 30 miles away on remote dirt roads, hidden among endless rice patties and almond orchards, they were largely disconnected. Kathryn de Wit, manager of the [Pew Charitable Trust](#)'s broadband research initiative, shares, “What COVID-19 has done is accelerate the pace of technological change. Getting online isn't an option anymore, and if you don't have that connection, you're pretty much cut off.”¹ To address this, Princeton Joint Unified School District produced weekly packets of printed work that students could pick up and return to campus, but this delayed the learning process by weeks, preventing teachers from providing immediate feedback for students.

Of course, rural school districts are no stranger to overcoming obstacles. Often plagued with small budgets, high operating costs, and a lack of qualified educators, these districts are accustomed to finding solutions. Marty Strange, policy director for the [Rural School and Community Trust](#), explains, “The challenge of luring a teacher to a small, low-wealth rural community with limited amenities, poor housing, and few college-educated peers, and keeping that teacher there beyond the first beckoning from a better situated district, is simply daunting.”² Furthermore, [The Foundation for Blended and Online Learning](#) writes, “Nearly one half (47.2%) of rural districts have no secondary students enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, compared with only 20.1% of town, 5.4% of suburban, and 2.6% of urban districts.”³ Combine

workplaces around the world. The K-12 opportunity gap must be addressed, and the first step is ensuring that rural students have equitable access to technology.

The graphic is divided into three main sections. On the left, it reads 'PRINCETON JOINT UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT' in small letters, followed by 'CAMPUSES CLOSED' in large, bold, green letters, and 'UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE' in white letters below. To the right, there are two green rectangular boxes. The first box is titled 'MEALS' and lists 'PRINCETON JR./SR. HIGH' at '473 STATE STREET, PRINCETON, CA 95970' with hours 'M-F: 8:30-9:30 AM'. Below this, it lists conditions: '- ANYONE 18 & YOUNGER -', '- ENROLLMENT NOT REQUIRED -', '- CHILDREN MUST BE PRESENT -', and '- TO BE CONSUMED OFF-SITE -'. The second box is titled 'PACKETS' and lists three locations: 'PRINCETON JR./SR. HIGH' (M-F: 8:30-9:30 AM), 'BUTTE CITY POST OFFICE' (M-F: 7:30-8:00 AM), and 'COLUSA ROUND TABLE' (M-F: 7:30-8:00 AM). At the bottom of the second box, it lists 'WILLOWS BUS STOP' (M-F: 7:30-8:00 AM).

Figure 2. Informational graphic released by Princeton Joint Unified School District informing students and parents of the packet distribution schedule during campus closures. With some students living over 30 miles away from campus, and many lacking stable internet connectivity, physical work packets were delivered via school vehicles to three neighboring towns to relieve travel burdens and encourage learning. Graphic provided by Princeton Joint Unified School District.

We learned a lot during the first months of distance learning: face-to-face instruction is irreplaceable, teachers are some of the most dedicated and innovative individuals in the country, and distance learning is ineffective without proper resources. Politicians, technology companies, and educators must collaborate to provide all students with access to technology to close the opportunity gap and put rural students on track to succeed.

Keywords: rural, school, teaching, education, technology, internet

¹ Editorial Board, "Doing Schoolwork in the Parking Lot Is Not a Solution," *New York Times*, July 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/18/opinion/sunday/broadband-internet-access-civil-rights.html>.

² Marty Strange, "Finding Fairness for Rural Students," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 92, no. 6 (March 2011), 12.

³ Butch Gemin et al., "Digital Learning Strategies for Rural America: A Scan of Policy and Practice in K-12 Education," *The Foundation for Blended and Online Learning* (2018), 14.