



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS

JOSEPH A. CURTATONE
MAYOR

MARY SKIPPER
SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

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Contacts: Susana H. Morgan, Somerville Public Schools – smorgan@k12.somerville.ma.us

Jeff Curley, Somerville Public Schools – jcurley2@k12.somerville.ma.us

Coordinated Somerville Community Effort Leads to Closing of Digital Divide for Public School Students

Somerville Public Schools nears 100% connectivity for families through targeted interventions, personalized approach

Somerville, MA – By the end of next week, Somerville Public Schools officials anticipate that close to 100% of families in the district will have internet access, thanks to intense and coordinated efforts by SPS and other City staff members, working in partnership with local service provider, Comcast. The district received a COVID 19 Assistance grant from the Somerville Job Creation and Retention Trust to support closing the digital divide for SPS students. This will allow students to access online learning while schools are closed for the rest of the academic year.

With a student population that includes 41.8% considered Economically Disadvantaged as defined by the [Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#) and more than 70% who are receiving free or reduced lunch, one of the most significant challenges in the transition to a remote learning model is ensuring equity of access to the full range of resources being provided to students.

“As challenging as this transition has been for our students, staff, and families, I am incredibly proud of the commitment of our staff and our city partners to ensure that we are moving forward in our work through a lens of equity,” stated Mary Skipper, Superintendent of Schools. “If we are going to stand true to our vision of equity, we have to be willing to diligently work through the challenges that may surface no matter what the current context may be, and be persistent and innovative in finding solutions. This was truly a team effort that will have a long-lasting impact on our students and our families.”

“As we’ve been asked to stay at home to help prevent the spread of this virus, internet connectivity has become an essential resource, as basic as electricity or running water. We cannot afford for a single student to suffer from a digital divide,” commented Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone. “The efforts of our school system to connect every family in our system, and to distribute needed technology, deserves to be celebrated. They have gone above and beyond to fulfill our mission of educating every child in our community, and a big thanks to Comcast for helping to make that possible. I know from watching our own sons attend classes online, this is a major transition for students. We are asking a lot of the kids in our community and I’m proud we’ve been able to give them the tools they need to succeed.”

The emergency school closure, which began on March 17, required quick work to put systems in place to continue supporting families and keeping students engaged in their learning. The top priority was mobilizing District and City resources to ensure that basic services that families rely on during the school year, such as daily breakfasts and lunches and weekend pantry food items for families most in need, continued without interruption. Assessing and addressing family technology needs quickly followed as the District’s instructional team worked on developing a [Remote Learning Plan](#) to serve its diverse student population. To date, SPS has loaned more than

1,100 Chromebooks, 184 Fire family edition tablets, and 34 iPads to families who did not already have a device at home to support their student's schoolwork. Chromebooks are being issued for students in grades 3 to 12, while the Fire tablets are to support students in pre-kindergarten to grade 2. iPads were distributed to special education students. The District is continuing to provision and distribute devices to families in need, so these numbers grow daily.

Based on responses to a survey administered shortly after schools closed, and personal outreach to families, approximately 450 families in the district indicated they had no internet service at home. Efforts to assist the approximately 15% of families in the district who did not have internet access or the financial means to purchase service, have continued in earnest since the emergency closure. While the District's remote learning plan includes multiple modalities for a broad reach, providing this critical service ensures equitable access to the full range of resources available for all students, and supports stronger connections with students.

The City and District worked with Comcast to address some of the challenges that families were encountering in accessing Comcast's *Internet Essentials* program, and came up with a plan to support families in need. SPS entered into a contract with Comcast last week for 450 promotional codes for 6 months of home internet service, at no cost to families. The SFCLC (Somerville Family Learning Collaborative) and its multilingual Liaison team have been working to support families in registering for the service, and developing resources in multiple languages to assist families every step of way. To date, more than 120 of the 450 families identified through the survey and personal outreach, have signed up for the 6 months of free home internet service. Outreach to the remaining families is continuing this week and next. In addition to the Comcast promotional codes, the District will be providing Verizon Jetpacks to families who are not eligible for the Comcast service, and is awaiting shipment of those devices.

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