

On December 20, 2020 AKINE made the city, the school committee, and the school district aware of a growing and unanswered community need. It was brought to our attention that there are numerous children in Easthampton that have not been able to access their free school lunches or reliable internet. After only getting a response from two city councilors, we canvassed sample Easthampton neighborhoods to collect more qualitative data and discovered more students in need. There was a subsequent city council meeting on January 20, 2021 where School Superintendent Dr. Allison LeClair was presented with questions about these issues.

The following report reflects the questions she was asked, her answers, and our analysis of those answers.

Questions	Dr. LeClair's Answer *	AKINE Response
How many students in each grade have absences of:	<p><b>"1-5 days</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Center Pepin - 142 students</li> <li>White Brook Middle School - 33)</li> </ul> <p><b>6-10 days</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Center Pepin -10 students</li> <li>White Brook Middle School - 18</li> </ul> <p><b>11-20 days</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Center Pepin -12 students</li> <li>White Brook Middle School - 10</li> </ul> <p><b>21 or more days?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Center Pepin - 4 students, of that 3 are K</li> <li>White Brook Middle School - 0"</li> </ul>	<p>Without full data for all schools in the district, it isn't possible to understand the full context of these absences. Two schools are missing from Dr. LeClair's answer.</p>
Of these students, how many have been provided additional assistance with internet capability?	<p>"Cellular hotspots have been issued to 24 families where internet service is not currently available in the home. 12 wireless access points have been issued to families to replace the existing wifi router in the home to improve wifi connectivity and consistency. How many families is the district paying for Spectrum internet service? Two families have had their bill paid in full for the year."</p>	<p><b>513</b> students in the district are <b>Economically Disadvantaged</b> so likely in need of support.</p> <p><b>Less than 1%</b> of possible students in need are supported financially.</p> <p><b>Less than 10% of possible students in need are being served.</b></p> <p>**</p>
What percentage are ELL families?	<p>No Answer</p>	<p>3.3% of students are English Language Learners. (ELL) **</p>
What form has that assistance taken? (e.g. hot spots, reduced internet costs or other financial assistance)	<p>"Hotspots: 3 <b>EL</b> (sic) families across the district were assigned district hotspots and the corresponding T-mobile service; WAPs: 1 <b>EL</b> (sic) family has been provided with wireless access points. <b>EL</b> (sic) students were provided with headsets to reduce noise in their environments and improve audio during class."</p>	<p>There are <b>47-48 ELL students.</b> Only <b>4 families</b> are receiving equipment to ensure they are connected to the internet.</p>

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<p>How many students (by grade) qualify for school provided meals?</p>	<p>“Beginning in March of 2020, all children between the ages of 0 and 18 are eligible for free breakfast and lunch seven days per week as a result of approved waivers with the USDA filed by the MA DOE as a result of the pandemic emergency. It should be noted that the school meals program extended through the summer vacation period this past summer with three pick up locations when, previously, the school meals program was limited to the 10-month school year. Previously, students qualified for free or reduced meals on an income eligible basis, other than Maple School. Because the economic profile of families at Maple School in the aggregate qualified that school for the Community Eligibility Program, all Maple School students qualified previously for free meals. All District students were provided breakfast and lunch five days per week previously. The waivers currently in place continue until the end of this school year.”</p>	<p><b>The requested data was not provided.</b></p> <p>Using pre-pandemic numbers, our figures show that approximately 500 children qualified for free meals. So why are only 300 students receiving them?</p> <p>Additionally, there are 2,890 children in Easthampton between the ages 0-18. ***</p>
<p>For these students, how are you ensuring they are receiving what they need in terms of transportation and scheduling in order to pick up these meals? What has that outreach looked like?</p>	<p>“There has been repeated and regular communication with families about the availability of school meals at no cost. It has occurred by email, postings to social media, school newsletters, signs and postings, and personal outreach by school staff. The cell phone number of the district's Director of Business Services was distributed and has been available to families since last March. Meal pick up hours were modified at the beginning of the school year based on feedback from families. In every case brought to our attention where a family is having difficulty accessing meals, their need has been accommodated including facilitating the pick up of meals by others, delivery to the home, extending hours of pick up, etc.”</p>	<p>Given the urgent need, AKINE is helping the schools to organize and deliver meals to families who need it. However, this stopgap measure is not enough.</p>
<p>Of those students, how many have been provided assistance with internet access? What type of assistance was provided? Has there been follow up with these families to ensure the internet capabilities are sufficient for the number of students in the house?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>No Answer</b></p>	<p>By not addressing these questions, we can only guess what is known about this need in Easthampton. This is highly concerning and we hope the city council will follow up with this.</p>
<p>Of those students, how many have been provided devices to participate in remote learning?</p>	<p>“Any student <b>that has requested</b> a device has been provided with a device.”</p>	

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<p>Describe the 1:1 computing environment in detail. What types of computers are families/students and teachers using?</p>	<p>“Our students are using Chromebooks. In the elementary grades, we initially distributed <b>older Chromebooks</b> while we awaited a large delivery of <b>600 Chromebooks</b>. Those Chromebooks arrived shortly before the holiday vacation, and the IT staff has been configuring them and building administration is disseminating them.” Chromebook computers were made available for every student in the district. Some students did not choose to take the district provided Chromebook, opting instead to use their own device. <b>Due to the limited budget, low end Chromebooks were all that could be purchased. These devices have very limited computing capability, and struggle to support an active Zoom meeting while working in Google Classroom.</b> The issues in the home are many times not internet bandwidth, but instead <b>limitations of the computer</b> and issues with the home wifi system.”</p>	<p>This does not address the question of how many devices (Chromebooks or not) are currently provided to students in the community. If Chromebooks are not capable of supporting remote learning, they should not have been the school department's choice to purchase for the pandemic response.</p>
<p>Describe the process for tech support. Are new devices tested so that families can be prepared for potential problems? Where/how can a student or family member get immediate support?</p>	<p>“The Technology Department has added a “Technology Help Request” button to the website (www.epsd.us). If you are having issues with a Chromebook, or connectivity, or access, etc., click on that button and fill out the form that comes up.”</p>	<p>When a computer does not work, web-based tech support can not be accessed.</p>
<p>In the event that the hot spot provided is not working, how is support provided if no internet access is available? Is support available throughout the day by phone? What is the phone number to call? Is there proactive outreach for families struggling with technology?</p>	<p>“Families will either submit a helpdesk ticket or contact their student's teacher or school administrator. The teacher or administrator will submit a ticket.”</p>	<p><b>No proactive support for families.</b> A tech support hotline with one number for all to use, clear hours of operation, and an option for help in other languages would be a pro-active response.</p>
<p>What is the replacement plan in the event of a device failure?  How will these replacements be financed?</p>	<p>“Families can notify the teacher, the administration or the Tech. Department regarding device failures.”  “We purchased 600 Chromebooks this summer using CARES federal funding.”</p>	<p>The current technical infrastructure to support students with inadequate technology is clearly not addressing the need, and should be assessed and improved.</p>

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<p>What type of outreach and how frequently are families contacted to assess the technology effectiveness?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>No Answer</b></p>	<p>Other than AKINE's canvassing efforts, there has been no systematic attempt by the school district, in 11 months of remote schooling, to assess needs and reach out to families.</p>
<p>Has there been a "needs assessment" for students and what actions have been taken as a result?</p>		
<p>What programs have been explored for free or reduced rate internet access?</p>	<p>"Early on in remote learning, Charter was offering free internet for families and we disseminated that information to families multiple times. The challenge was that if families were already involved with Charter, particularly if they were delinquent or already had service, they were unable to take advantage of this offer."</p>	<p>Companies other than Charter provide Easthampton households with internet or support hot spots. Mayor LaChapelle affirmed that charter is difficult to work with and ended special programs in June 2020.</p>
<p>Has the district contacted the local internet provider (Charter Cable) for expedited internet access and/or negotiated a reduced rate for remote learning</p>	<p>"We have communicated with Charter via the phone and have found them less than ideal to work with. A different customer service person each time, and the one time I attempted to be transferred to a manager, I was booted out. They won't put information in writing for us."</p>	<p><b>Yes, this was done.</b></p>

We encourage you to contact the city council, mayor, and school committee with any concerns these findings may raise: <https://easthamptonma.gov/city-council.html>.

For a recording of the January 20th City Council Meeting see:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOkfi7LDCLw&t=6958s%29%2C>

\* Dr. LeClair's answers are her written answers to the city council: For the full written answers see:

<https://docs.google.com/file/d/19SAi9rGR3uD9K-CKR1yrT55X4-arcBdt/edit?filetype=msword&gxids=7628>

\*\* According to the MA Department of Education statistics.

<https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=00860000&orgtypecode=5&leftNavId=300&>

\*\*\* From United States Census data:

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/profile?g=1600000US2519370>

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