“**Connect Our Students” program launches to increase Internet access**

**for K-12 students across Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky**

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**CINCINNATI, Ohio** – Cincinnati Bell, Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS), Greater Cincinnati Foundation, United Way of Greater Cincinnati, and ComputerXpress are partnering with several organizations to help thousands of K-12 public school students in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky access low-cost Internet connectivity at home in time for the 2020-21 school year.

There are approximately 283,000 public school students in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly 46,200 of those students have no Internet service at home. This lack of digital equity creates unequal access to information, technology, and opportunities to learn, which further widens the well-documented achievement gap. The ramifications of unequal digital access became particularly clear in March when schools transitioned to remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and thousands of students could not participate.

The “Connect Our Students” program is focused on increasing digital equity through pilot programs in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky that will be tailored to meet the needs of local school districts. These pilot programs, which start in June, will help partners identify learnings and best practices necessary to expand the “Connect Our Students” program to additional public school students throughout the summer.

**Cincinnati Pilot Program**

The Cincinnati pilot program will deliver connectivity to approximately 2,000 qualifying students from five CPS schools who currently lack Internet access: Rockdale Academy, South Avondale School, Hays-Porter Elementary School, Roberts Academy, and Fairview Clifton German Language School.

CPS officials are working with Cincinnati Bell to identify qualifying students and facilitate installation. All connections will be compliant with the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA).

“Approximately 24 percent of our families do not have access to the internet, according to data released by the U.S. Census in 2019,” said Laura Mitchell, superintendent of Cincinnati Pubic Schools. “We are honored to be a part of the ‘Connect our Students’ pilot, and appreciate the support of The Greater Cincinnati Foundation, Cincinnati Bell, and ComputerXpress. This private-public community partnership is critical to help remove barriers to remote learning and increase technology equity and accessibility.”

The following organizations are funding the Cincinnati pilot program: Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center, Interact for Health, the Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile, Jr./U.S. Bank Foundation, StrivePartnership, and the Greater Cincinnati Foundation.

“Connecting students from low-income families to the Internet has become even more urgent with the switch to online learning due to the coronavirus pandemic,” said Greater Cincinnati Foundation President and CEO Ellen M. Katz. “These students already run into significant roadblocks to their education, and we know that clearing their paths to academic achievement is vital to their futures, and to that of our community.”

**Northern Kentucky Pilot Program**

The Northern Kentucky pilot program will deliver connectivity to approximately 680 qualifying students from the following school districts: Boone County, Kenton County, Campbell County, Covington Independent Public Schools, Erlanger-Elsmere Independent, Newport Independent, Dayton Independent, Ludlow Independent, and Bellevue Independent.

Officials from the United Way and participating school districts are working with Cincinnati Bell to identify qualifying students and install service. The Horizon Community Funds of Northern Kentucky and Greater Cincinnati Foundation are funding the pilot project.

“This is a great example of the collaborative spirit and power in Northern Kentucky to come together to level the playing field for students. The computer, powered by the internet, are the pencil and paper of the 21st Century. Another barrier to learning has been eliminated thanks to the wonderful work of United Way, the Horizon Community Funds, and Cincinnati Bell,” said Jay Brewer, Superintendent of Dayton Independent Schools.

“COVID-19 exposed the importance of access to technology, especially when it comes to virtual learning,” said Moira Weir, President and CEO of the United Way of Greater Cincinnati. “The ‘Connect Our Students’ program will ensure no student is left behind.  Maintaining educational and social ties during COVID-19 is the way to academic growth and positive mental health.”

**Funding Opportunities for Expansion Plans**

Greater Cincinnati Foundation and several community leaders are working to identify additional funders to support expansion plans for the “Connect Our Students” program. Members of the public may also contribute to this effort. A $200 donation will connect a student to the Internet for a year. All funding from organizations and individuals will help offset costs so that Cincinnati Bell can deliver the necessary bandwidth to support interactive applications such as video calls for $16.67 a month to qualifying students.

ComputerXpress has created a web site – [www.connectourstudents.org](http://www.connectourstudents.org) – where organizations and individuals can contribute to the “Connect Our Students” fund, which will be managed by the Greater Cincinnati Foundation. Organizations and individuals may support Northern Kentucky fund-raising efforts by texting “NKYWIFI” to 71777. The United Way is managing those donations.

“Online learning and being digitally connected is taken for granted by most, but for many, access to the digital highway is blocked by orange barrels,” said Steve Pollak, owner of ComputerXpress. “It is incumbent upon us to work together and find solutions to break down the barriers and pave the onramp to the digital highway for students that would otherwise be left behind.”

The “Connect our Students” program continues Cincinnati Bell’s ongoing commitment to supporting students, families, and teachers across Greater Cincinnati.

“It is critical that all students in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky have access to education – which means that all students must also have access to the Internet to participate in remote learning,” said Leigh Fox, President and CEO of Cincinnati Bell.

“Cincinnati Bell has invested over $1 billion to build out our fiber network – but that investment means nothing if students can’t access the Internet for school. We are proud to be part of the ‘Connect Our Students’ program and to be working with so many great organizations and individuals on this effort.”