

Bridging the Digital Divide Through Coding

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Whether you agree with the idea of reopening schools or not, distance learning will soon be the norm. The old-fashioned educational system of long days, crowded classrooms and antiquated expensive textbooks will become a thing of the past as parents and students adjust to the changing mode of education. Everyone must embrace the fact that this will be a turbulent academic season.

As parents, we must adjust our traditional thinking and adapt to a changing narrative about education and the outlook for career prospects for our children. Honestly, many of the professions and business models that we once wanted for our children may be gone, and many will never return – especially with major brick-and-mortar operations, which are barely holding on during this retail apocalypse.

Related: How Remote Education Is Evolving During the Crisis

With most K-12 schools across the country facing the reality of distance learning, parents must also face the reality that the goalpost is moving toward tech-driven fields and careers. From medicine to law and engineering, distance learning will drive new innovation and demand within the tech sector and lead the future of entrepreneurship.

My son's school has always been prepared for remote/distance learning as all K-12 students are issued an Apple iPad Pro on the first day of school. No notebooks, pen or paper required,

as all notes from the class are shared via Canvas. If a child is absent due to illness, they can log in from their iPad and listen to the instruction via FaceTime by requesting the teacher log in from his or her desk.

Apple has been a silent frontrunner in the distance-learning space since the first iPad launched in 2010. Recently, Apple announced updates to its Everyone Can Code curriculum, which introduces students to the world of coding through interactive activities. It is designed to take students all the way from writing their first lines of Swift code to building their first apps.

Why is coding so important, especially now?

With the closure of schools in March 2020, more than nine million students did not have the high-speed home internet required for online learning. In addition, there continues to be a parent/caregiver technology knowledge divide with many of the required programs needed to transition to remote learning. The high-speed internet access divide will negatively impact students as they will trail behind their digitally connected peers and classmates, forcing them to wait for paper packets with limited instruction and support.

Subsequently, the academic gap may lead to a career prospecting gap as well. Industries that have felt the most impact from economic decline are hospitality, sports, entertainment, travel and tourism, and restaurants. Once upon a time in the K-12 landscape, career counselors steered students toward these professions as they presented stability and unlimited growth. Now, not so much.

Related: The Tech Industry Can Be an Accelerator for Change. Here's How.

Coding helps kids with communication, creativity, math and imagination. Apple recently launched its new Learning from Home website, where educators and parents can access on-demand videos and virtual conferences on remote learning plus schedule free one-on-one virtual coaching sessions, all hosted by educators at Apple. “Without coding, computers would literally do nothing,” says Travis Addair, a senior software engineer at Uber. “They would be completely useless.”

The next generation of entrepreneurs are facing the new possibility of self-paced online learning and will need skills to meet the needs of a post-COVID-19 world. How can we close the learning gap this school year, while giving students the skills for a successful future?

Visit your local library

I know it sounds antiquated and anecdotal, but many libraries have reopened and are providing free online access for patrons. Digitally divided communities can create a concentrated effort to encourage students and parents to use libraries for the academic year and learn new career skills, such as coding. We cannot afford more students to fall behind this year, so contact your local library.

Teach students new leadership paths

I’ve had many open and honest conversations with my 15-year-old son about what the real world will look like after he graduates and factors he must consider when choosing his own leadership path for the future. Although he has always been groomed to work in our family business, I want him to explore other options, without limiting himself to outdated beliefs and career prospects. Coding is now just as important as English and math.

Even if there is a vaccine or cure tomorrow for COVID-19, the damage to many industries that we have normalized as “stable”

may not be necessary or sustainable for graduates in 2020 and beyond. Consider coding as a tool to accelerate learning or as a career prospect. Either way, students will have a head start academically.

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Internships! Internships! Internships!

My success would not have been possible without the gift of several meaningful internships. My first internship was at the Brooklyn District Attorney's Office when I was a senior in high school, where I worked closely with attorneys, judges and the police department to learn every aspect of criminal law before deciding on law school. I served as an intern for three years and gained valuable skills and connections, which lead major law firms to make considerable high-paying job offers while I was still an undergraduate.

To retrain the unemployed, underemployed and/or underserved market, internships can accelerate the learning and lessen the digital divide by encouraging students to learn valuable skills beyond the classroom while completing their classwork. This can be a collaborative effort to provide Wi-Fi access and leadership skills to help students with limited options. Although many companies are working remotely during the pandemic, it is a great way to attract remote interns to join the team, while gaining access to technology as well.

Recent events have highlighted several inequities that have remained hidden in our society. Although there is no homogeneous solution, education will never look the same again. If you still need assistance with high-speed internet access, the FCC has released a list of resources to help students during this pandemic. While parents are transitioning into their new roles as homeschool teachers this year, it is equally important to remember to help students explore

rewarding leadership paths of the future, not the past.

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