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FEEDBACK

Working from home, completing schoolwork and surviving quarantine without internet. How are rural communities coping?

By EM HOLTER

TIDEWATER REVIEW | APR 07, 2020



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With little internet access, King William students must make the drive to the high school in order to connect and finish their schoolwork. (Emily Holter)

Pulling into the King William High School’s parking lot, Holly Sill shuts off her car and waits as her two children connect to the school’s Wi-Fi and begin their daily coursework.

With a 3-year-old, two high schoolers and herself, the car becomes cramped. The remaining space is quickly filled as notebooks and papers sprawl across unclaimed territory. With computers resting in their laps, it is a necessary balancing act.

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Like many in the region, Sill and her family do not have adequate internet access. In order to finish their schoolwork, they make the drive nearly every day, sitting for long periods of time in the parking lot.

“We had been going to my parent’s house in Henrico to do school work,” Sill said. “We haven’t done so in over a week because I am afraid of putting my almost 70-year-old parents at risk.”

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With social distancing at the forefront of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and

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the digital world.

While communicating through email, meeting online and holding classes in a virtual setting is not ideal, it is feasible in more densely populated, urban areas. For those living in rural settings, maintaining a job, staying on top of schoolwork or merely surviving months of quarantine becomes an everyday challenge with little to no internet access.

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Finishing an academic year at home

When Gov. Ralph Northam issued a mandate requiring all K-12 schools to close for the remainder of the academic year, it sent shock waves through the community and its school divisions.

Those in the Tidewater regions' most rural counties, King William and King and Queen, might feel the after-effects for years to come, according to the Virginia Department of Education's media relations director Charles Pyle. .

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The Virginia Department of Education is working closely with local divisions to decide the best course of action, offering guidelines on how to adjust during this unprecedented time.

While the VDOE has suspended Standards of Learning tests and has offered leniency for credit and graduation requirements, its media relations director Charles Pyle said the department's guidance is broad because each division looks different.

Presently, the department has not issued any guidance on how to deal with a lack of substantial internet access.

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“We do not provide the mechanics, we offer guidelines and the divisions have the power to decide how they conduct the rest of the year,” Pyle said. “We encourage them to make use of their capabilities. There are some that are taking advantage of their robust online presence and some that use transportation to deliver learning packets.”

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Divisions have considered the state department’s guidelines and are moving forward with their plans to finish out the school year.

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While King William and King and Queen counties face similar internet limitations, each school division has offered up different approaches to the problem.

In King and Queen County, students will complete the rest of the academic year entirely offline. Picking up learning packets every two weeks at the schools, students are required to complete and turn them in.

“We made this decision because a lot of our families do not have internet,” Superintendent Carol Carter said.

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King William residents line-up to pick up their students' learning packets. (King William County Public School)

In King William County, the school division is offering learning packets for its primary and elementary students, and has online material for its middle and high school students.

Through Schoology, an online education app that allows teachers to post notes, assignments and lectures, students are required to use their school-issued laptops to complete their work, Superintendent David White said.

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Realizing that some students might not have adequate internet access, the school set up a hot spot for residents to drive there and work from their cars.

Despite the division's efforts, community response has not been as forthcoming.

“It's just not a comfortable environment to do work in the car as they suggest and, on top of that, Schoology has been down, which is another inconvenience,” resident Emily Gifford said. Working to keep up with schoolwork and dealing with anxiety, Gifford said her daughter struggles with the new challenges. .

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Choosing to do schoolwork at home poses its own problems, as it is a feat just to get adequate internet connection.

“Our son is a junior, and doing homework from home is very hard,” resident Tammy Nelson said. “Something that should take 2 to 3 hours to do turns into 10 to 12 hours because of the connection.”

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Virginia is not alone in its internet access problems. Like many states, it faces an internet saturation disconnect, which means access to high-speed internet is readily available in urban and heavily populated localities, while its rural landscape sees limited access.

For example, in 2017 Northern Virginia saw 70% of the world's internet traffic, while only 55% of the state's rural population had access to high-speed internet, according to a U.S. [Chamber of Commerce report](#).

While there are several reasons for the disconnect, it is primarily because bigger

internet speeds at a higher cost.

While other divisions in areas with adequate internet do not face the same problems, the VDOE said it cannot determine whether those divisions will be ahead of those who do not have adequate access.

If students miss out on certain required lessons then the division will be required to include what was missed in the upcoming year, Pyle said.

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“You can’t have an event like this without feeling an impact,” he added. “But our guidelines offer help to keep them moving along and on track.”

Accessibility and providers in the Tidewater region

While residents in King William and King and Queen counties have the same means of connection, either broadband, satellite or through cable lines, like their urban counterparts, their options are limited to only a few companies that offer slower connection speeds, limited data and higher costs.

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Step by Step Charts
Infogram

For both counties, the primary providers include Atlantic Broadband, HughesNet, ViaSat and Verizon DSL.

After several meetings with local governments, Atlantic Broadband began activating its fiber-optic network in November 2019. While it offers the highest downloading rates, 50 megabits per second, at the lowest cost, \$40 month, it is only available to roughly 3,000 homes in the two counties.

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While Atlantic Broadband offers the fastest internet for the lowest cost, it only services roughly 3,000 homes in King William and King and Queen counties combined.

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, Atlantic Broadband set up hot spots for folks to drive-in and access the internet for free. The closest are located at 48 New St. and 6814 General Puller Highway, Saluda.

For most, ViaSat and HughesNet are the best, if not the only, option as their services are available to everyone in the county as long as their satellite connection

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Likewise, people who have a landline phone can choose to connect through Verizon DSL. The dial-up connection has its limitations as folks cannot use their phone and the internet at the same time.

In order for one student to complete schoolwork or for one person to telecommute, the Federal Communications Commission recommends people pick a plan with a minimum download speed of 25 Mbps and at least 10 GB of data.

While megabytes per second determines the speed in which something is downloaded, data determines the amount of usage per month.

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While urban areas have many options to choose from, rural residents are limited in their plans.

Both HughesNet and ViaSat's plans range from \$50 to \$150 a month for 12-25 Mbps with a 10-50 GB cap. Based on the Federal Communication Commission's recommendations, the average family of four should purchase a plan exceeding 25 Mbps with 50 GB of data.

Between activation and monthly costs, the average family would pay more than \$200 a month for a slow connection speed. If they choose the basic plan, they run the risk of exceeding their data limit and paying additional fees.

"My family and I live down Route 30, in the sticks, and it's impossible to get decent internet without paying hundreds. All of my teenager's schooling and my own is 100% online," King William resident Amy Koch said, who has a daughter in high school. "I've put my college education on hold in order for them to do their stuff. Not to mention being cooped up and not being able to use any form of television streaming service due to a lack of internet service."

In comparison, residents living in the nearest city, Richmond, 25 miles away, have the option to pay \$40 month for 200 Mbps with 50 GB of data, according to Verizon's website.

With both counties' poverty rates resting between 7% and 12% and state unemployment rates on the rise, the cost of having internet is just not feasible for many.

Hope for the region

In 2017, Northam announced his goal to bridge the gap and eliminate the saturation disconnect by 2028. With a plan to bring high-speed internet access to its rural localities, the state developed the Virginia Telecommunication Initiative Program, through the Department of Housing and Community Development.

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The VATI program provides targeted funds and grants to qualifying localities in need of high-speed, broadband internet access. If approved, localities will receive a budgeted amount of money that they will have to match by 20 percent, State Office of Broadband Director Tamarah Harris said.

According to Harris, the state plans to allocate roughly \$19 million annually to help facilitate its plan to have an estimated 660,000 people without access to join the grid by 2028.

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While the COVID-19 outbreak is expected to affect federal, state and local economies, the state’s Broadband Policy Specialist Kyle Rosner said the state plans to continue allocating funds toward the program.

While the application process is competitive, King and Queen County was approved and is set to receive \$2.2 million to expand its broadband efforts. It is expected to be budgeted into the fiscal year 2020-2021 budget.

Additionally, both counties have formed internet authority committees to appeal to outside perspectives and bring in more viable options.

“Since I’ve been in this role, I’ve seen it firsthand that we do have a problem and we need projects like this in order to get everyone access,” Harris said.

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Topics: King William, King William County, King and Queen, King and Queen County, Atlantic Broadband, internet, internet access, King William County Public Schools, King and Queen County Public Schools, Emily Holter, Tidewater Review, Virginia Department of Education, VATI program, Governor's Office, Governor Ralph Northam

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Sending out two buses each morning, the division distributes meals to folks across town. (Em Holter)

WEST POINT — With the sounding of the morning bell, the race is on as students pour into West Point’s school cafeteria and fill their plates with breakfast.

As some students fill the cafeteria, others are sitting down at home eating their pre-packed breakfasts. With the division’s hybrid model in place, which sees students in school two days and at home for two days, the division has had to shift how it feeds its students.

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But, with hours of training, it's nothing the division's Nutrition Manager Misty Osborne and her staff can't handle. They've been running the same marathon since March.

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While breakfast is served, Osborne's team begins preparing for lunch. For Osborne, the morning is spent packing hot and cold coolers, filled to the top with hundreds of that day's lunches and the next day's breakfasts.

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When the coolers are packed and the buses pull up, the baton is passed to Osborne to finish the last leg of the race — distributing meals to students all across town.

“We're preparing about 450 meals a day,” Osborne said. “Everyone has their things to do and we keep on rolling.”

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FEEDBACK



The division's School Nutrition Manager Misty Osborne rides along, passing out meals each day. (Em Holter)

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While the division's cafeteria has always seen hundreds of breakfast and lunch meals travel through the line, some free and reduced, this year looks a bit different.

This year, the division is ensuring no child goes hungry. For many, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought on financial hardships many never thought they'd face. As a result, every student, 18 and younger, receives breakfast and lunch for free.

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The division began this practice in March following Gov. Ralph Northam's executive order which closed the schools indefinitely. Now, thanks to a federal grant, the division plans to continue the practice until June 30, 2021, the division's Special Education, Student Services and Transportation Director Larry Frazier said.

While the summer months have typically served as a break for Osborne and her team, this year, their time was spent training, perfecting their craft, as they packaged meals and distributed them across town. Now, they've nearly doubled their workload as the schools reopened under its hybrid model, preparing daily meals at school as well as the meals that are being delivered.

But, it is an undertaking, Osborne said is worth it.

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This year, amid the pandemic, school breakfast and lunch are free to all students. (Em Holter)

Every morning, two buses takeoff, coolers resting in the seats — one traveling downtown while the other heads uptown.

On the downtown bus, Osborne sits waiting for her newfound routine to begin. As the bus bounces along its familiar route, Osborne begins placing the hot lunches

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With months of experience, it has become second nature to Osborne. As one-stop approaches, her muscle memory takes over, packing the exact number of meals needed. With the new hybrid schedule in place, Osborne knows who will be eating in the cafeteria that day and who will be receiving a meal at home.

As the meals are handed off to the smiling faces, they are greeted, by name, with “hello” and “have a good day.”

“You really get to know them because you see them every day,” Osborne said. “The school’s so small, too, so it helps.”

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While the bus follows a strict schedule, there are days students opt to not grab their lunch. With virtual learning at the forefront for some families, it can be easy to lose track of time and miss the bus. But, that doesn't stop Osborne from trying.

With meals in hand, she gets off the bus and heads to folks' doors. After a few knocks, she typically returns empty-handed.

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West Point Public Schools began distributing meals in March when the school shutdown. (Em Holter)

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have access to transportation. As a result, by distributing along bus routes, the division can reach more families.

“West Point Public Schools is fortunate to have an incredible School Nutrition Team. Since the beginning of the COVID pandemic back in March, they have stepped up to ensure that children in our community do not go to bed hungry,” Abel said. “I think our meals program has meant more than just providing food, it has helped us stay connected with our families to let them know we are still here for you.”

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Em Holter, emily.holter@virginiamedia.com, 757-256-6657, @EmHolterNews.

Topics: [West Point](#), [Town of West Point](#), [West Point Public Schools](#), [West Point School Division](#), [Superintendent Laura Abel](#), [Misty Osborne](#), [schools](#), [VDOE](#), [education](#), [free meals](#), [Tidewater Review](#), [Em Holter](#)

Em Holter



Em Holter is an award-winning reporter covering West Point, King William, King and Queen, New Kent, Williamsburg and James City County. At VCU, she studied both communications and history. Hailing from a small, rural community in West Virginia, Em strives to report on underrepresented spaces and give a voice to those who often go unheard.

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By EM HOLTER
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Flipping through pages of history books, Lawson-Marriott Elementary School teacher Stefanie Kready knows the importance of recounting stories of the past.

Her lesson plans speak of human perseverance, of people, places and times long since passed. Each week, her students learn of the hardships folks faced, how they

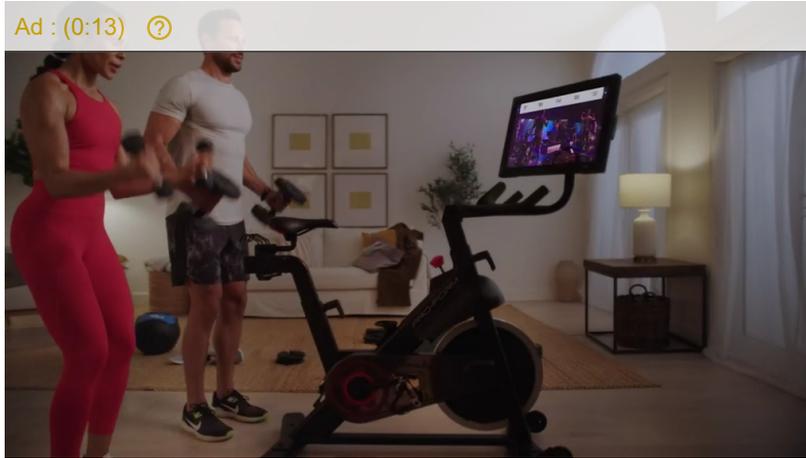
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Kready brings history to life as her students find someone in the community to share their memories, telling of their own experiences living through defining historical moments. From Vietnam to the Sept. 11 attacks to the Berlin Wall collapse, Kready has seen many history lessons come alive.

What she never could have imagined was that her students now might be sharing their own stories next year as they face hardships, endure and persevere amid the COVID-19 outbreak.

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Forced to work from home, educators are navigating their newfound reality and finding solutions to problems they never would've expected to have to in their careers.

“I am still struggling to wrap my head around the reality that we won't physically be returning to school this year,” Kready said. “I hate that they're missing out on activities that will give them a sense of closure and pride, as they move on to the next chapter of their lives.”

Across the bridge, West Point High School math teacher Laura Norris is experiencing similar hardships as she navigates the world around her.

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Before logging on to answer emails and beginning her online meetings, Norris glances up to read over the sticky note she has fixed at the top of the screen.

It reads, “stop trying to be the same teacher you were a month ago.” It is a constant reminder of the changing times.

Basing her teaching methods around problem-solving and hands-on learning, Norris said one of the biggest problems she's faced was adjusting her methods.

“America's schools have never had to improvise like this,” she added. “Teaching remotely is just as exhausting as teaching in-person.”

In the classroom, her students would get together, solve problems and learn from one another. Now it's not so easy, she said. Students can't interact with each other

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“The closure of schools will undoubtedly have an impact on students’ learning, and while the district has done a great job providing learning opportunities, nothing comes close to in-person education,” Norris said.

But, with as many problems, Norris has found solutions.

Following her newfound mantra, Norris is offering up feedback instead of letter grades. By keeping it simple, Norris said she is leading her classroom with love and not lessons.

“My biggest concern right now is the emotional wellness of students,” she said. “As educators, we really just focusing on loving our kids. They might not learn as much as they learned in a classroom, but we still make it a priority to make sure that we’re meeting as many emotional needs as we can.”



Running the Girls Who Code Club, West Point Elementary School Teacher-of-the-Year nominee Whitney Hixenbaugh works hard to teach students STEAM-based learning. (Whitney Hixenbaugh)

Facing similar issues, West Point Elementary School teacher Whitney Hixenbaugh went from leading several hands-on science, technology, engineering and mathematics-based classes and clubs to working at home without the same resources.

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ACK Switching to an online classroom has its challenges but Hixenbaugh said it is incredible to see how well her students are adjusting.

“There have been tears of grief from not being able to hug students goodbye before their next big step to middle school,” Hixenbaugh said. “I’ve also felt so much pride and satisfaction from watching my students not only persevere and adjust to our current reality but excel.”

For Acquinton Elementary School fourth-grade teacher Madison Dickason, her online classroom has transformed into a place where students can come and be themselves.

Looking to bring a smile to their faces, Dickason said she has scheduled weekly online meetings with her classes just to relax and see one another.

“Last week, we got together and I had them tell jokes, so everyone had to come with a joke, and that’s what we did,” Dickason said. “These kids don’t get to interact with each other like before so, these weekly get-togethers are a way to bring back some sense of normalcy.”

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Without getting the chance to say goodbye, many educators left their classrooms still filled with materials and no set date as to when they might return. For those students who will be moving up the ladder and on to the next school, they will not have the chance to visit their favorite teachers one more time.

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“I miss the chatter in the halls. I miss students popping their head in my classroom just to say ‘hi.’ I miss seeing their faces during those ‘a-ha’ moments,” Norris said.

Despite the abrupt shift, teachers across the region are shifting gears and making do with what they have in their current situation.

Whether it is holding one-on-one meetings with students to check-in, giving feedback instead of grades or planning online class meetings just to visit with one another, they are still working to better students’ lives.

“They are very aware of what is happening around them. It’s scary for adults but they are handling it like champions,” Hixenbaugh said.

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history. Growing from a small, rural community in West Virginia, Ed strives to report on underrepresented spaces and give a voice to those who often go unheard.

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