GOVERNOR

School Buses to Serve as Wi-Fi Hot Spots for Remote Learning

Donations from AT&T, Duke Energy Foundation, Google to help equip more than 280 school buses with Wi-Fi

Raleigh

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Starting this week, additional school buses will bring internet access to communities without it to help more North Carolina students connect to school online. Governor Roy Cooper announced the plan to equip more school buses with hotspots following the announcement that K-12 public schools would continue remote learning through the end of this school year.

“In many communities, school buses are already delivering meals to students and their families. Now they're delivering Wi-Fi for online learning,” Governor Cooper said.

As many as 280 more school buses will be equipped with Wi-Fi thanks to donations from AT&T, Google and Duke Energy Foundation. AT&T and Google are providing up to 100 Wi-Fi hot spots each and the Duke Energy Foundation is providing up to 80. The first 156 devices are expected to be delivered starting today to communities in 29 counties across the state.

At Governor Cooper's request, NCDIT is working with the North Carolina Business Committee on Education (NCBCE) and Hometown Strong as well as providers and other corporate partners to help more students who lack home internet access get connected during this time, including through installing Wi-Fi technology on more school buses.

The buses will travel to underserved areas in school districts and park in designated locations, such as a school nutrition meal distribution site or a grocery store, so students can use this temporary access to turn in assignments, download materials and connect with teachers. The drive-up Wi-Fi access will also be available for all residents in the communities to use to connect to healthcare providers, apply for unemployment, and access other critical information and services while exercising appropriate social distancing precautions.

These buses will join the hundreds of other free Wi-Fi hotspots from providers across the state who are already providing locations where residents can access the internet during this crisis.

“We are deeply thankful to all the vendors and service providers who are stepping up to help our children and our communities,” NCDIT Secretary and State Chief Information Officer Tracy Doaks said. “Their response — including offers for free or affordable service, without fees or penalties — is helping keep North Carolina connected during this critical time.”

Schools in Avery, Bertie, Bladen, Burke, Caswell, Chowan, Columbus, Duplin, Edgecombe, Franklin, Gaston, Gates, Halifax, Harnett, Hertford, Johnston, Martin, Montgomery, Northampton, Perquimans, Person, Randolph (includes Asheboro City Schools), Robeson, Sampson (includes Clinton City Schools), Scotland, Tyrrell, Vance, Wayne, Warren and Yadkin counties will receive the first 156 Wi-Fi hotspots. A team from the NCDIT Broadband Infrastructure Office, Hometown Strong and the N.C. Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) began delivering the hotspots the afternoon of Tuesday, May 5, to local education advisors. Outreach to other school systems to determine the location of additional hot spots is ongoing.

Local school officials will determine the exact locations and schedules for school bus Wi-Fi hot spots in their communities. Additional information, including links for locations, will be added to NCDIT's webpage when available at www.ncbroadband.gov/covid19 (https://urldefense.com/v3/__https://click.icptrack.com/icp/relay.php?r=39781839&msgid=477142&act=20YB&c=1346310&destination=http*3A*2F*2Fwww.ncbroadband.gov*2Fcovid19&cf=13425&v=f14fa07320967ea5efe7fe2f43f7bf8a48891ftv40UBTL840HsFUPMPPRAGWz9aVSf8FZL7vAwl8zARmHkvKuhCaMyxOqodd9i$)

. The webpage also includes a map of other public Wi-Fi drive-up locations, as well as a listing of free or low-cost options for internet service during the pandemic. This list is updated as new offers and locations are added.

NCDIT's Broadband Infrastructure Office used data from Federal Communication Commission and NCDPI's school survey to identify counties with the most households unserved and underserved by high-speed internet. Working with partners at NCDPI, they then cross-referenced that information with counties using school buses to deliver meals to students, as well as information about cellular coverage, to determine where school bus Wi-Fi hot spots can be most useful. Some counties are already using school buses to provide internet access.

Quotes from Partners

AT&T: "Just as all our lives are being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, we all can play a part in helping our neighbors and our communities come through these days," said Trey Rabon President of AT&T North Carolina. "As part of our company's community-focused 'Believe' initiative, we are honored to support NCBCE in helping students have the resources needed for distance learning."

Duke Energy: "Families and students are facing significant and new challenges as they transition to remote learning," said Stephen De May, Duke Energy's North Carolina president. "We're proud to partner with NCBCE on an innovative solution to bring internet to students who may not have access at home."

Google: Lilyn Hester, Head of External Affairs - Southeast, Google, who serves as vice chairwoman of NCBCE and Chairwoman of the NCBCE Remote Learning Working Group stated: "Google was excited to work with Caldwell County leaders to turn our Rolling Studies Hall program into Rolling Hotspots, and we are thrilled to now team with NCBCE's remote learning task force to expand the program as part of a collective effort to make it possible for more students to engage in school work during the stay-home period. Bridging the digital divide is a top priority for everyone, and we are grateful to North Carolina's elected officials for helping to make these kinds of public-private partnerships possible."

NCDPI: "We appreciate this generous support for our districts that need it most," NC Superintendent of Public Instruction Mark Johnson said. "We will face many challenges, but working together, we will come out of this crisis stronger."

State Board of Education: Eric Davis, Chairman of the State Board of Education stated: "The State Board of Education works to ensure digital equity for the state's public school students. This partnership with AT&T, Google and the Duke Energy Foundation will allow more access for some of our most underserved counties. The Board's ultimate goal is to eliminate the digital divide to allow the same access for each and every child. These Wi-Fi hotspots are a start to getting these counties the resources they need to serve students despite their location."

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