

## A Proposal For The Widening Digital Divide

Over the past year and with the advent of school shutdowns, virtual school, and the merging of online and brick-and-mortar instruction, we recognize the challenging impact on teaching and learning for students, teachers and families.

In conversations with parents and grandparents, I have heard many versions of the following statements: "I have been sitting with my grandson every day in his virtual class. I've seen firsthand the enormous challenge for teachers and students to be successful. What is happening to students whose families are unable to support them? Who helps? What is happening to their learning?" These questions were repeated to me throughout this year and led to further reflection and more questions.

We have given Alachua County students laptops and some hotspot devices, but these are only part of the equation. Is there enough support after school for our students and families? Who helps a student at home when there are technical glitches or when Zoom, Canvas and passwords run into blank screens? What happens when internet connectivity is not available? How does lack of internet affect a student's grades? Does frustration among students and their families cause them to give up?

Alachua County schools have tech support during the day, but with more than 26,000 students on computers both virtually and in our brick-and-mortar schools, it is impossible not to have wait time. More importantly, I believe the use of the student's computer and access to online textbooks and internet is needed 24/7 and not just during the school day.

While our community acknowledges concern about the digital divide, I have not seen a long-term, community-wide plan for solving this concern. I would like to propose that our district initiate a work group with Alachua County and Gainesville city commissioners to bring forth strategies to reduce this digital divide by providing greater e-learning access in after-school programs. I believe there is great potential for the city and county recreational departments to reformat their recreational center activities to e-learning study rooms. What's a better use of city and county funds than after-school e-learning study rooms with extended evening hours for use by students? Each e-learning study room would have qualified tech supervision. Parents could be encouraged to participate with younger children, to the benefit of both. Meanwhile our public schools can consider spaces for extended use and work with city and county to provide transportation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized how the digital divide negatively impacts student achievement. We have tremendous resources in our community to develop innovative after-school programs that support our students' e-learning. I believe that by working with city and county commissioners, we would see significant progress in supporting students who need additional opportunities and resources to succeed. Now is the time to plan and implement both short- and long-term strategies to support our students and give them greater access to 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning tools.