



ECMECC
531 Elmhurst Ave. S
Braham, MN 55006
<https://ecmecc.org> - 320-396-3674

ECMECC Digital Navigator Project Report Prepared for Literacy Minnesota - 12/21/2020 by Marc Johnson

ECMECC is a joint powers educational cooperative owned and operated by 14 public school districts and one comprehensive Technical and Community College in East Central Minnesota. The cooperative has been providing synchronous and hybrid distance education since 1983. In the past decade, services have grown dramatically to include instructional technology, information technology and security, professional development and advocacy. ECMECC districts continue to work collaboratively to make great things happen for students in our area.

With the onset of the COVID pandemic and shift to distance learning in March 2020, ECMECC began working with our member districts to provide the support they needed and asked for. We discovered quickly that districts needed good data on Internet and device access, so we commissioned a survey to use across all of our districts to gather the information. Through the survey, we discovered that:

- Approximately 6% (over 1,200 students) had NO Internet service
- Nearly 10% (over 1,700 students) did not have a device for distance learning
- Over 25% (almost 5,000 students) had Internet service but it was not sufficient to be successful with digital hybrid or distance learning

Based on this information, we provided information to our districts on area service providers, discount programs that they were offering, contact information, and resources related to distance learning.

Understanding that the 2020-2021 school year was likely to involve some form of hybrid or distance learning, we worked with our districts to plan for the lack of access and devices that we knew would be a barrier to success. We learned of the digital navigator idea being developed through the National Digital Inclusion Alliance and found that it aligned well with many identified needs that our families and students had as they worked through distance learning in the Spring.

As we began to develop our digital navigator project, in the Summer, we learned of the opportunity to apply for grant funding through the Partnership for a Connected Minnesota. We applied and were awarded a grant in mid-September.

During September and October 2020, we trained 15 digital navigators who were assigned to directly support our member districts. Most of them were existing school employees who were pairing extra off-hours duties with their current work in the school district. Through a partnership with the East Central Regional Library, we also trained 19 library personnel.



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The navigators were introduced to many resources including provider maps, data on existing service providers and services they offer, opportunities for low-income families, community resources for families in need and much more. We created broadband guides for families that were customized for each district and established a collaborative Google group where the navigators could share resources and ideas and ask questions of each other.

The navigators have become the single or main point of contact in their respective districts for families and students who are experiencing difficulty with digital distance learning. They work closely with school technology personnel and receive referrals from building administrators, counselors and staff. The navigators reach out to these identified families through phone, email, text and other means to offer assistance with obtaining broadband service and refer them to other appropriate school or community resources when/if they identify other needs such as food or housing insecurity, language barriers or mental health issues.

Our project also contracts with an area technology support vendor to help families with technical issues and has purchased hotspots and/or devices for some districts to satisfy identified needs that the district does not have funds to address.

Through a partnership with East Central Regional Library, library personnel are available to provide navigator services to families as well as the broader community. Many of the library locations have open hours where students can go to the library location to access devices and broadband in a safe and controlled environment. The library also provides hotspots that can be temporarily checked out to test different providers as sometimes a provider that works in most locations in the district does not work for everyone.

It is not surprising that the largest challenge in our area moving forward is a lack of high speed broadband access. According to data from the Minnesota Office of Broadband Development, large portions of the counties ECMECC serves are unserved by any wired broadband services that meet Minnesota's modest 2022 broadband speed goals. The low population density and geography of our area contribute to a poor business case for many providers to bring high speed services to us and wireless and cellular service can be spotty and slow. Hotspots are not always the answer as many households are far from the nearest cell tower and, while phone calls might be possible, the data capabilities degrade rapidly according to distance from the towers. Additionally, these alternate types of broadband service, including fixed wireless, cellular and satellite are often cost prohibitive for many of our families.

As we move past the pandemic, we know that education will change and the need for connectivity will not go away. Getting ubiquitous high-speed broadband to every family in the state will be needed and helping families navigate the digital world will be a need for years to come. ECMECC expects to continue to support the people doing this work in our communities.