



Journal of Business and Social Science Review  
Issue: Vol. 5; No.6; December 2024 (pp.5-7)  
ISSN 2690-0866(Print) 2690-0874 (Online)  
Website: www.jbssrnet.com  
E-mail: editor@jbssrnet.com  
Doi:10.48150/jbssr.v5no6.2024.a2

## **Virtual Learning is Virtually Not for Everyone Taylor, R. K. & Taylor J.D. (2020)**

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The COVID-19 pandemic has left some school districts opting for virtual teaching and classrooms rather than face to face meetings with students. This decision has been made in order to not only keep students safe, but also parents, teachers and staffs of schools. District leaders have no doubt consulted the Center for Disease Control guidelines about social distancing, handwashing, and cleanliness of school buildings when making their decision. They have ultimately determined that learning will be best completed virtually this year, or least the beginning of the school year, to see if COVID-19 later subsides enough to safely open schools for face to face instruction. Numerous universities are continuing on line classes this year as well, including some of America's top universities such as Harvard, which is guaranteeing campus housing to only freshmen, and classes are 100% online (Ross, 2020). Some universities are doing a combination of online classes and face to face classes such as The University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee, which too is allowing some students to live on campus Kuebel, E.(2020).

There are school districts who are following both examples of Harvard and are strictly online, and others, such as the University of Tennessee which have students enrolled in both to keep the class sizes down. Some districts have opted to give parents a choice between virtual or in person. However, for some with lower income, there may not actually be a choice. Tennessee's median income for the past 12 months is reported as \$28,511 (United States Census Bureau Quickfacts, 2019), with Greene County Tennessee's income reported as \$23,688. Greene County Schools reported that 2,320 of its 6,269 students (37.0%) live in true poverty and that 30% do not have access to the internet based on a survey performed in spring of 2019 (C. Malone, personal communication, July 31, 2020). This mimics the results found by Broadband consulting group, Pyramid Consulting that reported 54.9% of Tennesseans whose income is \$20,000 or less do not have internet, whereas only 8.3% of Tennessee household income of \$75,000 do not have internet (T. Burnworth, personal communication July 30, 2020). It appears that systemic racism has reared its ugly head again, and is now dictating that students who do not have internet, which are mostly those of low income, must go to school in person and risk COVID-19 exposure for their education because it is not possible for them to participate in virtual learning.

Districts such as Greene County Schools in Tennessee are working tirelessly to provide a one to one initiative in grades second and up by retrieving the lap tops at schools for student take home distribution. This includes maintenance to ensure that all computers work properly and have proper apps and information needed for virtual learning. These creative efforts should definitely be applauded, but what about the 30% of students who do not have internet access? Even those who could afford it, but living in the rural county, do not have internet because the broadband needed to provide it is non-existent in rural areas of the county. Thus, virtual learning is not an option for everyone.

The lack of broadband needs to be known as a problem and its solution needs to be a high priority. This begs the question, "Who is responsible for providing the Broadband and why has it not been implemented already?" Part of this is answered by the mountainous terrain itself where issues providing electricity also occurred in earlier years. However, acknowledging the difficult terrain, it appears that the solution is more of a business and economic decision than an educational decision.

Electricity in the Tennessee Valley region, along with other areas in the Southeastern United States, were created by Congress and signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on May 18, 1933. The entity was named the Tennessee Valley Authority Act (TVA) (Editors Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). This was done by building 29 dams along Tennessee waterways.

TVA originally operated under the Department of Agriculture to provide navigation, flood control, produce fertilizer, and to provide electricity to the rural areas of Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky, Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia for economic development.

Over the last fifty years TVA has become well known for generating electricity and many of their original responsibilities such as maintaining the waterways and erosion, have been passed on to the local power companies (LPC's) and TVA has stopped producing fertilizer and focused on economic development and generating electricity. Their generated electricity is passed on to LPC's which function under TVA guidelines. The LPCs have become the organizations responsible for taking on broadband as a public policy issue and implementing steps to improve services available to their constituents. This is sensible since they provided the infrastructure of poles and lines, have substations, and own the property rights of ways to areas already. Other companies who have the capability of providing broadband in the East Tennessee area are Century Link, Comcast, and Charter Communications. So it seems that the capability of extending broadband to rural areas is possible through one of these entities. However, capability is not the issue: the issue is cost. There is no return on the dollar for the companies installing it.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue stated "When we are able to deploy broadband ubiquitously, think of all the things we will be able to design, harvest, and develop ... Broadband in rural America will be as transformative in the 21st century as rural electrification was in the last century" (United States Department of Agriculture, 2019). Some LPCs have followed this advice and installed broadband to their rural cliental. One company in North East Tennessee has projected an arduous 10 year breakeven point for its service provision, but recognized it as a must for the economy to grow and flourish. One does not have to be an expert in business to know that a ten year breakeven is not a desirable outcome for companies.

The lack of Broadband continues to oppress students who already experience an economic disadvantage of a low socio economic status (SES). Low academic performance normally correlates with low SES (Miln&Plourde, 2006). If school districts in rural areas go totally virtually, then we, Greene County, are failing to educate 40% of our student population and will widen the academic gap between the low SES and the high SES. If students without internet have to participate in face to face instruction, then we are putting them more at risk to develop COVID-19. If standardized tests are administered during the COVID-19 2020-2021 school year, then we are undoubtedly testing privilege. It is with great hope that LPCs and companies which can provide broadband to rural areas follow Benjamin Franklin's words of, "An investment in knowledge pays the best interest" (Franklin, n.d.) and realize that this investment in our students is more than a ten year breakeven and is a much bigger return on the dollar as our students are their future workforce.

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