

*Mississippi

(Continued from page 9.)
 my mom doesn't want me to be at home by myself," Dutt said.

So they worked out a system: The mother parks her car underneath a tree, goes in to work and the student logs in to class from the backseat.

"It was very touching to me to know how hard she's working to log in to her class," said Dutt.

But Montgomery, who has around 100 students herself and another nearly 100 students of a colleague on maternity leave, said despite hiccups at the beginning of the semester, she finds she's getting into a good groove.

"In the beginning it was a little bit overwhelming ... but it's almost like a ritual now," she said.

Wright, the state superintendent, and other state officials say as the devices come in, the focus will shift to other areas that will help educators effectively implement distance learning.

Wright argues the combined focus on curriculum, professional development and expanding access to connectivity is the key not only to students keeping up during the COVID-19 pandemic but also to improving inequities that existed before the pandemic.

Since the state Legislature appropriated \$150 million in federal coronavirus relief funds toward the effort in July, administrators at the Mississippi Department

of Education began an effort that could normally take one year or more and completed it in six weeks.

In those six weeks, the department conducted needs assessments from every school district, developed minimum specifications for all of the technology, conducted countless webinars with school superintendents and technology directors and finally ordered a massive number of devices from CDWG, a technology solutions provider company headquartered in Illinois.

School districts were able to choose between three types of devices: Windows laptops, Google Chromebooks or Apple MacBooks or iPads.

The devices are the first step in the roll-out of the Equity in Distance Learning Act, which also includes components around professional development for teachers and curriculum.

J.C. Lawton, director of information systems at Columbus Municipal School District, said his district is using the funds to provide devices to students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. All high schoolers already had individual devices.

Lawton said despite some hiccups – such as not being able to thoroughly research the type of device before being locked into the program – the experience of purchasing the devices has been a good one.

"I'm excited to be able

to put 2,700 devices in students' hands," said Lawton.

The Equity in Distance Learning Act gave a deadline that all devices must be delivered to school districts by Nov. 20, or school districts would not be reimbursed for their orders. The clock was – and still is – ticking, but officials at the state education department say the devices are on track to meet the deadline.

"During a global drought on Chromebooks, we have 90% of our (Mississippi's) order on the ground in the United States right now," said John Kraman, chief information officer of the Mississippi Department of Education, told the State Board of Education at a meeting last week. "There's more work to do on the Windows, Macs and iPads."

Wright is confident there won't be any issues meeting the delivery deadline. She said this is in part because Mississippi used bulk purchasing power – that is, ordering all school districts' devices in a uniform manner instead of individual school districts ordering their own products separate from one another.

"We've seen across the nation supply chains breaking down, and they (CDWG) have been on top of it in Mississippi," said Wright in the interview with Mississippi Today. "That's been a big plus for us because of the quantity (of the order). If we had just pushed the money out to districts, each little dis-

trict would have been its own entity standing in line. I'm glad we did it the way we did it."

But some school districts still went out on their own. Ken Barron, superintendent of Yazoo County School District, is one of those.

"We weren't going to sit around and wait" for the Legislature or for MDE, said Barron. Forty percent of students in his school district chose the virtual option. "I was concerned about having the devices in students' hands in time."

Barron said his district conducted a reverse auction which resulted in such a good price he decided to replace the entire fleet of devices in the district. As of late September, they were on schedule to be delivered in October, said Barron.

Stacey Graves, the chief financial officer of DeSoto County School District, said her district participated in the state's program, officially called Mississippi Connects, and the process worked well for them.

"What we're getting, you just can't beat it," she said. "I'm getting 27,770 devices for a little over \$3.8 million," or an average of \$137 per device.

Graves also appreciated the specifications of the devices, including cases and insurance.

"These come with everything you could ever want on them, including special insurance for if a kid drops it," she said. "In the first two weeks of our distance learn-

ing, we'd already had four kids drop their devices."

Graves admitted, however, that figuring out how to identify why particular students don't have access is difficult.

"We surveyed all of our students during registration, so we know who does not have internet connectivity, but we don't know why they don't have it," said Graves, whose district had nearly 35,000 students last year. "We are working on gathering that information to determine the best solution to connectivity for each student."

Phillip Burchfield, executive director of the Mississippi Association of School Superintendents, oversaw the Clinton Public School District as it transitioned to a "one to one," or one device for every student, school district in 2012.

He said superintendents have concerns about the longevity of the devices.

"It takes time for teachers to understand virtual learning (and devices), and that's not even mentioning the kids," said Burchfield. "So by the time we were making strides (on that front), our hardware, our computers, are going to be on their last leg. A big concern of superintendents is where is that money going to come from? Is that going to be left up to individual school districts who are already on a tight budget?"

Money from the state education department covered 80% of the costs of devices,

and districts were expected to match 20%. The Legislature encouraged schools to use funds from another pot of federal funds to cover the 20% – but some districts were faced with more costs.

Columbus Municipal, for example, is one. That school district ended up having to pay an additional \$467,738 from its reserves to cover its order – not an insignificant cost for a district of just under 3,500.

Districts and the state education department are working ahead as devices purchased through the program begin arriving. On Wednesday, West Point School District became the first to receive its order. Tate County School District is scheduled to receive its Friday.

"Now we need to pivot to ensure children are learning with these new devices," said Wright, noting the department has already created a large team to coordinate statewide professional development for teachers.

She also said the department and school districts are doing what they can to improve internet access by working with providers and purchasing hot spots and data plans.

Wright and other educators have echoed a common theme throughout the pandemic: inequity in education is a major issue during normal times, but the presence of COVID-19 has highlighted it to an extraordinary

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