

# School closings leave rural students isolated

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Report for America

CUBA, N.M. — The midday arrival of a school bus at Cyliss Castillo's home on the remote edge of a mesa breaks up the long days of boredom and isolation for the high school senior.

The driver hands over food in white plastic bags, collects Castillo's school assignments and offers some welcome conversation before setting out for another home.

The closing of classrooms and the switch to remote learning because of the coronavirus pandemic have left Castillo and other students in this school district on the sparsely populated fringe of the Navajo Nation in New Mexico profoundly isolated — cut off from direct human contact and, in many cases, unconnected to the grid.

Like many of his neighbors, Castillo does not have electricity, let alone internet.

It is yet another way in which the pandemic has exposed the gap between the haves and have-nots in the U.S.

"There's not a lot to do here. You clean up, pick up trash or build stuff. Like, I built that shed right there," the 18-year-old Castillo said, pointing at a pitched-roof plywood shed.

"Hopefully, hopefully by next semester we'll be going back into school," he said. "I don't like online. I like to be, you know, in school, learning. That's just not me. I just find it a lot easier and a lot better than just out here, not doing nothing."

The Cuba Independent School District, centered in a village of 800 people, has kept the buses running as a way to bring school to students who live in widely separated cabins, trailers, campers and other structures on a vast checkerboard of tribal, federal and county land.

On their routes, the buses carry school assignments, art supplies, meals and counselors who check in



Cedar Attanasio/AP Photo

A student carries a math book delivered by school bus driver Kelly Maestas along his rural route outside Cuba, New Mexico.

with students who are struggling with online bullying, abuse, thoughts of suicide or other problems.

The buses are a lifeline for families in the Cuba school district, of whom nearly half are Hispanic and half are Native American, including many Navajo-speaking English-language learners.

Many do not have running water. Castillo and others with no electricity charge their school-issued laptops with car batteries or at a relative's house. One student has sent her laptop on the buses to be charged at school. This far out, internet service is unavailable or prohibitively expensive.

For students without home internet, the buses bring USB drives loaded with assignments and video lessons from teachers. Some students like Castillo eventually asked for paper packets because of the difficulty in charging laptops.

With COVID-19 cases spiking in New Mexico to their highest levels yet, it is unclear when the district will begin offering in-person classes again.

The district has a record of adapting to challenges, and a high school graduation rate of 83% — well above

the state average — to show for it. It has long employed a "community school" approach in which social workers, nurses and teachers help students around the clock, not just during the school day, on the theory that they will do better academically if their home life can be made better.

All students were issued Chromebooks in 2019, well before the coronavirus outbreak. That made the shift to distance learning easier in March when school buildings shut down.

Other rural districts around the country have likewise been engineering ways to connect with students who are otherwise disengaged during the pandemic.

In San Joaquin, California, about 30 miles west of Fresno, the Golden Plains Unified School District found early in the pandemic that students were out working rather than doing schoolwork.

"We would have kids call from the fields. They were picking peaches," said Andre Pecina, an assistant superintendent, who noted only 40% of high school students were participating in distance learning. "Once COVID happened, parents were like, 'Let's go to work.'"

# Responsible technology

Dear Annie: My husband and I have two teenage children, and both of us work out of the home. We try hard to be engaged in our children's lives and be aware of everything they're doing. As working parents, it's not easy, but we try hard.

As our children have become teenagers, we've noticed them becoming increasingly more addicted to their phones. We've set all types of guard rails around screen time, acceptable apps and taking their phones into their bedrooms. They listened much better when they first received their phones. Lately, they've been exploiting every opportunity to abuse the rules.

My husband and I have tried to crack down, but we're just not able to constantly be alert. We know it's important to crack down, so I wanted to reach out and see if you have any advice. Thank you. — *Confused About Cellphones*

Dear Cellphones: First, I applaud you for your focus on this issue. Since you both work, it makes sense for your kids to have cellphones so you can communicate with them as needed. However, screen time can be a serious issue that impacts social development, communication skills, schoolwork and many other important areas. Other issues including cyberbullying can arise as well.

You and your husband should begin by staying firm on your rules for cellphone use. Also, there should be no cellphones in their bedrooms, particularly at night, or at the dining table. In fact, phones should be silenced or turned off

during meals. Put parental controls and locks on apps when possible, and maintain the right to conduct random searches of their call log, email and apps. Have your children sign a contract that enforces escalating punishment, such as a 24-hour period without their phone for the first infraction, 48 hours for the second, 72 hours for the third, etc.

You may do all this in a positive way. Let them know that you are going to give them independence to use their phones but hold them accountable to using them in a mature and thoughtful way. Have a conversation about cyberbullying, phone etiquette and the dangers of posting or sending messages without understanding long-term implications. Encourage your children to communicate openly with you about any issues they may have or anything that is making them uncomfortable. Good luck!

Dear Annie: My only child, "Frank," died unexpectedly on July 14, 2019. He was 34 years old. I want to tell all parents who worry that they don't get to see their adult children often enough to appreciate each moment with their happy and healthy children. The pain of losing a child will never go away or ease. So, even though you may not see them as often as you want, treasure each moment. — *Still Hurting*

Dear Still Hurting: I can feel the — very understandable — pain in your letter and am so very sorry you lost your son. You highlight an important message: Be grateful for each day, and each day spent with a loved one. Life is a gift to be treasured.

DEAR ANNIE



ANNIE LANE  
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