

Marin learning hubs flourish as pandemic grinds on



Pod leader Derneshia Morgan helps a student at Bridge the Gap College Prep in Marin City on Wednesday, Sept. 30, 2020. The Marin City-based nonprofit has set up Learning Hubs to help high school kids who are having trouble with distance learning. (Sherry LaVars/Marin Independent Journal)

By [KERI BRENNER](#) | kbrenner@marinij.com | Marin Independent Journal

December 29, 2020 at 10:39 p.m.

Initially seen as a pandemic afterthought, Marin's 55 learning hubs are drawing increasing attention as a way to narrow the digital divide for needy students during coronavirus-imposed remote instruction.

The hubs were started during distance learning so that an estimated 9,500 Marin students — those in low-income households who lacked technology, or whose parents were unable to help them — could receive the same aid as affluent students with private tutors or pandemic school pods.

"There were only about 30 hubs with about 275 students when we started collecting data back in mid-October," said Shelley Hamilton, communications director for the nonprofit Marin Promise Partnership, which is tracking the county's learning hubs along with the Marin County Office of Education.

Since then, the number of hubs has grown to 55, "serving over 1,500 need-based students, which is about 15% of all 9,500 students living in poverty," Hamilton said.



"That's almost a 452% increase in students served in the last two months. Most of the recent increase is at middle and high schools," Hamilton said.

Hub operators met as a network online for the first time on Dec. 15, according to Hamilton. Also, Marin Promise Partnership has developed a web portal for learning hubs on its website at marinpromisepartnership.org. One of the key functions of the portal so far is to establish a data tracking system for student attendance at the hubs that can be coordinated with each student's school.

The portal also includes an interactive map of all the hubs operating in Marin. Tracking the data is important to show how, as a whole, the hubs are a key strategy to "close the equity gap caused by COVID and distance learning," Hamilton said.

"By connecting with the schools, and the hubs connecting together, the hubs are really helping the students in the schools," she added. "The hubs are helping the students to improve attendance in the schools, and helping to improve the engagement of students."

That close communication is a potential pandemic "silver lining" for the future, by strengthening "the relationship between schools and their community partnerships — and tightening that relationship and their cooperation around the learning hubs," Hamilton said.

Of the 55 hubs, the YMCA of San Francisco and Marin is operating 16, she added. Others are being run by individual schools, libraries, nonprofits and child care centers.

On Dec. 9, the YMCA held a forum on the issue with Mary Jane Burke, Marin superintendent of schools; Dr. Lisa Santora, Marin deputy public health officer; and state Assemblyman Marc Levine, D-Greenbrae, who represents Marin in the Legislature.

"One third of the total children — or over 10,000 of the families in Marin County — are eligible for free or reduced-price school breakfasts," said Jason Lau, chair of the Marin YMCA and the Marin County Child Care Commission.

"Currently, we are serving only 25% of these children," Lau said. "Our learning hubs are critical in addressing multiple challenges at once by supporting essential workers, helping close the achievement gap and proving that in-person education can be done safely and effectively."

The cost to operate the YMCA hubs is \$3.5 million, according to the organization's website. A fundraising campaign is underway to raise \$1 million to offset the hubs' operating expenses.

Other hubs are being financed through a variety of means. Bank of Marin, for example, donated \$200,000 early on to assist the Marin County Office of Education in setting up new hubs.

In Marin City, Andy Robles, a director at the nonprofit Bridge the Gap College Prep, said his agency's learning hub is based on students' expressed needs.

"The kids are motivated to learn and participate in class — but they don't always have the resources or the space at home to do so effectively," Robles said.

The local nature of the hubs tends to inspire more trust in students, Robles said.

"We've had consistent attendance at the hub from students who didn't have the same attendance at the high school," he said. "I think this is partially because our hub is located in the housing complex where many of our students live, which gives them easier access to school and close enough to home for them and their families to feel safe during the pandemic."

Hamilton said the learning hub network is "looking into the future" as many Marin schools return to in-person learning in early 2021. Many schools will return in a hybrid model, which still calls for distance learning, at least part time.

"We're even trying to look into what are our students going to need into and through the summer to help with the lost learning opportunities," she said.

According to Robles, Bridge the Gap plans to continue programming into the summer "so we can help students transition back to school in the fall of 2021" and help with credit recovery.

"The fallout of this remote model is not yet fully known," Robles said. "Our goal is to help students return to in-person instruction as prepared as they possibly can be."

Tags: [Coronavirus](#), [Education](#), [Marin schools](#), [newsletter](#)

