

# Elementary school students forced to use Taco Bell parking lot for internet in Salinas, California

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This week, a photo of two elementary school students doing their schoolwork outside a Taco Bell went viral on social media. The photo shows the two young students sitting in the parking lot of the fast-food restaurant in Salinas, California with pencils and notepads in hand and computers in their laps. The students needed access to Taco-Bell's free Wi-Fi signal because they do not have access to the internet at home.

The photo prompted widespread condemnation of the city and school authorities for not doing enough to provide internet to children in need, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic while students are attending school virtually. There were countless posts from workers and young people expressing their anger and frustration at the vast gulf of inequality expressed by the photo, as well as sympathy for the children, and the thousands of other children who are in similar situations.

In today's world, an internet connection is as much a human need as electricity, running water, and housing. This recent photo is just a snapshot of the conditions faced by thousands of workers and poor people across the US, one of the wealthiest nations on earth.

Approximately 15 million to 16 million K-12 public school students in the US live in homes with an inadequate internet connection, or have devices that aren't equipped for distance learning, according to a study from Common Sense Media and the Boston Consulting Group published in June.

Already, the "digital divide" that exists between rich and poor families is being used by some as a pretext to transition from virtual classrooms back to in-person learning even as tens of thousands in the US continue to be infected with the deadly coronavirus every day.

Those who advocate the speedy reopening of California Schools claim that the digital divide puts poor children at a disadvantage.

Parents and students should not be forced to choose between going to school and getting sick with the virus, or staying home with inadequate resources to participate in online schooling. On the contrary, the demand must be made to provide whatever resources are needed to make sure that all children receive high quality education, including decent housing, health services, and the tools and internet connection necessary for online education.

Under the current conditions, there is no way to safely reopen for in-person learning in any part of the US. As of Monday afternoon, COVID-19 had infected a reported 751 people in Monterey County, and many of the cases are concentrated on the east side of Salinas. In Monterey County, agriculture workers make up more than a third of confirmed COVID-19 cases, and Latinos make up nearly 80 percent of them.

Re-opening the schools under these conditions would surely have deadly consequences in Salinas, Monterey County and the region more broadly.

Salinas, a city of 155,000 people, is surrounded by the fertile Salinas Valley and bills itself as the "salad bowl of the world" for its agricultural bounty. Salinas is also the birthplace of John Steinbeck, author of the *Grapes of Wrath*, which focused on the struggle of agricultural workers and migrant farmworkers in California during the Great Depression.

The city is a center of COVID-19 transmission in California. As of August 26, with 4,555 cases, Salinas represented 55 percent of Monterey County's total of 7,685 cases. Within Salinas, 48 percent of the cases

were in the working class areas in the city's east side, with median household incomes of less than \$30,000.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported in June on the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic in Salinas. The *Times* linked the high number of cases to the lack of adequate housing, explaining that there is a shortage of some 45,000 working-class homes in the Central Coast region of California. The report showed that homes in Salinas often house up to seven people per home, five people per bathroom, and in many cases more than one family living in one- and two-bedroom houses.

The Salinas school district responded to the photo of the students at Taco Bell by providing their family with a Wi-Fi "hotspot," and is petitioning the state government for more hotspots for all households in the district that need wireless internet. The response is likely to be that there is no money for such an endeavor.

The reality is that the money does exist in society to provide high-speed internet to everyone. California is home to 154 billionaires who own more wealth than all but the four wealthiest countries in the world. Between March and June, the same period during which the virus was spiking throughout the state, California's 154 billionaires saw their net wealth increase by about \$170 billion, more than triple the state's budget shortfall.

In order for this wealth to be redirected to meet human need, instead of lining the pockets of the ultra-rich, the working class must mobilize independently of the Democrats and Republicans, to fight for its own interests.

The newly-formed Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which is organizing opposition of students, parents, teachers, and all other workers to the back-to-school campaign, has made free access to the internet a central element of their campaign.

In the committee's first statement, they demanded full funding for public education, internet access, and online instruction. They write that "the trillions handed over to the rich must be redistributed to provide universal access to high-speed internet, food security, mental health care, special education support and all other resources needed to provide the best quality remote learning for every student and educator."

We urge students, parents, and other workers who are horrified at the situation facing poor and working class youth, such as the students forced to do their school

work in a Taco Bell parking lot, to get involved in the fight today.



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