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'TECHNOLOGY IS EVERYTHING': CLOSING THE STUDENT DIGITAL DIVIDE

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, United Way for Southeastern Michigan has provided grants to fund the purchase of more than 8,000 Chromebooks and laptops for students.

When 17-year-old Kimani Journey found out that his senior year of high school would be completely virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic, his mind raced with thoughts of missing out on college tours and social events. But most of all, he wondered how he and his 15-year-old sister would get by sharing the family's old laptop.

Kimani and his sister attend University Prep Science & Math in Detroit – a city where 35 percent of students lack access to the technology they need to learn, **according to Education Trust-Midwest**. Access to computers and high-speed internet was an issue before the pandemic, but the shift to virtual learning has made it impossible for students to succeed without these and other digital supports.

"We had just moved a month prior, so there was a lot going on," Kimani said. "We talked about alternating with the laptop and one of us using our phone for class.

"That would've meant I couldn't attend some of my AP classes or my Python coding class."

BRIDGING THE GAP — TOGETHER

United Way for Southeastern Michigan works to ensure that all children can thrive in nurturing environments with access to high-quality education. That now includes making sure students like Kimani can learn effectively at home.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, United Way for Southeastern Michigan has provided grants to 74 public and charter schools, community-based organizations and local programs in the region, funding the purchase of more than 8,000 Chromebooks and laptops for students.

With grant funding from United Way, University Prep Schools (U Prep), which includes three K-12 districts and 10 schools serving 4,900 students, was able to purchase Chromebooks for nearly 50 percent of its scholars.

Covenant House Academy, which provides at-risk youth with opportunities to earn a high school diploma, also received grant funding from United Way to help purchase 550 Chromebooks.

Malika Harris also uses the device for research outside of school and submitting applications in hopes of landing a job.

Covenant House Superintendent Terrence George said closing the digital divide and ensuring students have equal access to technology is one of the most important issues our community faces.

"We have to understand that connected devices are the pathway to an awful lot of places," he said. "Without access, students have a very limited view of the world. It's the way to apply for jobs, to find resources or to look for a new home if a family gets evicted.

"It's everything."