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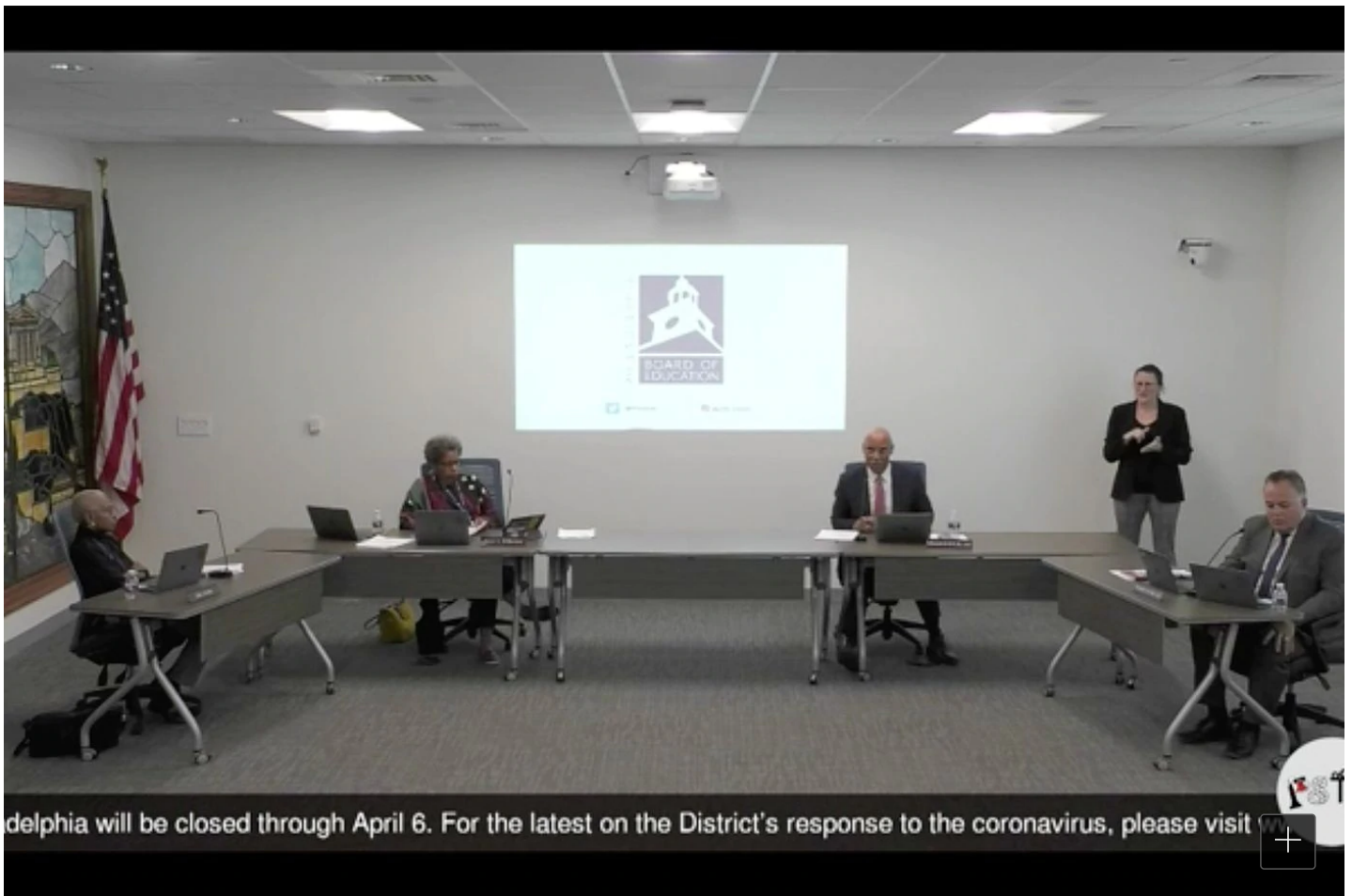
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Philly schools spending \$11M on computers to be used during coronavirus closures; Comcast CEO, family donating \$5M

by [Kristen A. Graham](#), Updated: March 26, 2020



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News about the coronavirus is changing quickly. The latest information can be found at [inquirer.com/coronavirus](https://www.inquirer.com/coronavirus).

The Philadelphia school board voted Thursday night to authorize \$11 million for the purchase of up to 50,000 computers to make distance learning possible for all students during an extended school closure forced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It also gave Superintendent William R. Hite Jr. temporary special powers to make financial and operational decisions quickly and absent formal board approval during the national emergency.

Closed for two weeks to date, and at least through April 6 by state order, the Philadelphia School District has not been requiring students to learn during the pandemic because many lack the technology needed for online instruction, and because it has not made provisions for students with special needs and English language learners. The school system will now [repurpose some existing Chromebooks](#) for its 120,000-plus students but needs the additional computers to place machines in the hands of all children.

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Updated: June 4, 2020 — 9:10 AM

How many cases have there been?

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Hite said the Chromebooks, to be purchased from Computer Dealers Inc., will be ready for distribution by April 8 “using social distancing and health and safety protocols,” and learning will begin by April 17 — meaning Philadelphia students will have missed four weeks of instruction.

Comcast Corp. CEO Brian Roberts on Thursday night told The Inquirer that he, his wife, Aileen, and their children are donating \$5 million to offset the cost of the computers. Roberts said that when he learned of the district’s inability to conduct lessons, he was moved.

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“It’s obviously intimidating with the public school system — how do you help as a public citizen?” Roberts said. “This is a very obvious, very tangible thing, to know that every public school kid is going to have a laptop. It’s a heartbreak to imagine kids not being able to learn who are ready to learn.”

» **READ MORE:** [Read more: As coronavirus closes schools, wealthier districts send laptops home with students. What about poorer districts?](#)

The Roberts donation, which will be made public on Friday, came against the backdrop of an extraordinary meeting where no members of the public were present, most board members participated by phone, and a usually crowded board table featured just four people observing social distancing protocols.

“This is unprecedented territory for us as a governing board,” President Joyce Wilkerson said.

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Wilkerson said she felt confident in a resolution to authorize Hite “to take actions quickly and nimbly which are expressly needed to facilitate the COVID-19 response efforts. The item includes clear guardrails such as monitoring measures and financial limits, and will be crucial for our district to better serve our families by providing the ability to quickly act on important and rapidly changing things such as the ability to remediate asbestos or deploy new technologies.”

Though the school board voted to approve the broad outlines of a \$3.4 billion 2020-21 budget, that action seemed secondary, and chief financial officer Uri Monson made it clear that the pandemic and economic downshift will make the fiscal picture change. The board is not expected to adopt a final budget until May 28.

Instead, most attention was paid to a number of questions that don’t yet have answers: How will Chromebook distribution be handled? Will spring sports be canceled? Will in-person instruction resume before September? How will COVID-19 affect grades, graduations, and access to education for the city’s most vulnerable children?

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Hite said the district hopes to announce by early next week the earliest date by which Philadelphia schools could re-open. Pennsylvania has closed schools through April 6 and has not required school districts to provide instruction during the time away from schools. It's not yet clear what instruction will look like in Philadelphia and how it will factor into student grades and promotions.

Some criticized the district for not moving swiftly enough.

Donna Cooper, executive director of Public Citizens for Children and Youth, said that other big-city school systems have moved with more urgency than Philadelphia to get technology in student hands.

"Parents and students didn't miss the fact that Superintendent Hite announced that soon technology will be made available to students," Cooper said in written testimony submitted to the board. "But two weeks is too long."

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Cooper called for instruction to begin by April 6, more than a week before the district's promised rollout of instruction. She said the district ought to have home-based services in place for English language learners and students with special education plans by April 15.

Board members said the district needs to act urgently to get students back to learning. Christopher McGinley, a lifelong teacher and administrator, said he had consulted with educators from around the country who have dealt with extended school closures caused by hurricanes and other disasters.

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Each of them told McGinley the same thing, he said: “Things balanced out, things got caught up, and their kids continued to make progress. I’m certainly very hopeful that we get back to school during this year because everything happened so abruptly for everyone.”

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But board member Mallory Fix Lopez emphasized how the pandemic had [laid bare inequities in state education funding](#), and said that “the achievement gap will likely widen during this time,” as students in better-resourced districts shifted from in-person to distance learning with little interruption and Philadelphia children spent weeks idle.

“We should all be outraged, because if you live in Philadelphia,” Fix Lopez said, “public education impacts your life.”



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