

THE COURIER-TRIBUNE

Tuesday, February 9, 2021



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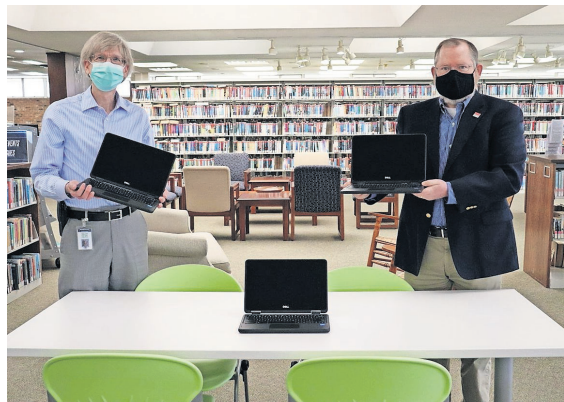


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Chromebooks to help remote students



Pictured are Ross Holt, left, and Kenneth Sherin. [CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]

By Amy Dunn

Asheboro Courier-Tribune
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEBORO — N.C. Cooperative Extension, Randolph County Center, has received a grant for \$5,000 as part of the BAND-NC initiative. In addition, the Randolph County Center has received \$5,000 from the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) to assist with digital inclusion efforts. With a combined \$10,000, the Randolph County Center purchased 23 Chromebooks which were distributed to the Randolph County School

System, Randolph County Public Library and Randolph-Asheboro YMCA for its Y-Academy.

Kenny Sherin, county Extension director, said, “Twenty-three laptops will not fill the digital divide for everyone, but these laptops will help 23-plus students achieve their remote learning goals.”

Patrick O’Hara, executive director of the Randolph-Asheboro YMCA, stated, “The Y-Academy has enrolled over 160 children during this unprecedented time. With the addition of the Chromebooks, the academy will be able to

help provide computers to the children who do not have access to computers to complete their Google Meets and homework.”

The Randolph County Public Library already has a lending program for WiFi hotspots and other types of technology to help close the digital divide. When asked how these computers will help, Ross Holt, library director, said, “We know there’s a critical need for access to both connectivity and devices for students to learn remotely. With our buildings closed

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due to the pandemic, it's imperative for us to do as much as we can to help meet this need. Combined with the hotspots we check out and the parking lot WiFi we offer at all seven libraries, the Chromebooks will help fill the gap."

The BAND-NC initiative was created because COVID-19 is exposing the digital divide in North Carolina and its consequences for all of us. In response to this immediate need, the Institute for Emerging Issues at N.C. State (IEI) in partnership with the Broadband Infrastructure Office at the N.C. Department of Information Technology, and with principal support from the John M. Belk Endowment, is addressing the digital divide across North Carolina through a new program called Building a New Digital Economy (BAND-NC). BAND-NC will provide rapid-response

community innovation mini-grants to communities across the state.

Launching digital inclusion planning

N.C. Cooperative Extension in Randolph County will be launching the second part of the BAND-NC Initiative, which is developing a digital inclusion plan for Randolph County. Digital inclusion planning is a community-building effort that documents the county's digital assets and then works to close the gaps in digital access and opportunities. A well-researched and documented digital inclusion plan will help county organizations in their application for grant funding to close the digital divide in Randolph County.

When asked about the importance of closing the digital divide, Shenna Creech, director of digital teaching and learning for the Randolph County School System, said, "Closing the digital divide is essential to ensuring educational equity for all

students. All students and families must have access to high-speed internet and a device to access educational resources and opportunities."

"The digital divide has been an issue for a long time and the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the deficiencies in digital access and usage. The time is right to work together to develop innovative solutions to bridge the digital divide in Randolph County," Sherin said. Beyond the pandemic, digital access and utilization will continue to be an issue. Commerce, health care and productivity will increasingly become dependent on adequate digital connections. Without this intentional effort to close the digital divide, economic opportunities for county residents will decrease moving forward.

To learn more about the digital inclusion planning process in Randolph County, contact Kenny Sherin at 336-318-6000 or kenneth_sherin@ncsu.edu.