

Behind COVID-19 and decaying mental health lies a deep digital divide

written by Mark Cogan | November 23, 2021



Photo by [Bangkok Bank](#)

There has always been a distressing gap in the quality of education in Thailand. But the COVID-19 epidemic has exposed and exacerbated the digital gap in the country. In this latest piece, Mark S. Cogan highlights how the digital gap is leaving the most vulnerable behind and recommends that Bangkok make a real commitment to building a modern education infrastructure.

By Mark S. Cogan

After almost two years of interrupted education in Thailand due to the drawn out effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, children are feeling drained, exhausted, and depressed. The [United Nations warned recently](#) that a return to school cannot be delayed, citing additional risks from exposure to violence and abuse, mental distress, missed meals, and routine vaccinations. The plight of Thailand's exhausted youth also caught the attention of the much-maligned National Human Rights Commission (NHRCT), who noted that [nearly a third of Thai students were at risk of depression](#).

In the run up to schools opening, however, children in many parts of the country became infected with the coronavirus, prompting school officials to close the doors to classroom-based education once again. In Mukdahan Province, [more than 1,100 students and teachers returned to online learning](#) after 80 students tested positive. A large secondary school in [Khon Kaen planned to reopen on November 1](#), but local faculty infections forced the school to reopen online only. Similar events recently occurred in Chaiyaphum, [where a young student became infected](#) and in Ubon Ratchathani, where [five schools have been closed](#) due to the virus.

Behind the dreary news of struggling students and schools wrestling with the difficulties of reopening schools amid a stubborn and resilient coronavirus exists a much deeper problem, revealed only in small doses. Throughout the Kingdom's struggles with COVID-19, many Thai students have faced an additional challenge just to gain access to the online learning system that has adversely affected so many. Thailand's vast internet inequality or digital divide remains a serious problem.

The digital divide is complex. There is a divide in terms of access, affordability, accessibility, and availability. COVID-19 has exposed these weaknesses in Thailand and has worsened the gap between those Thais who can take full advantage of internet technologies both for their livelihoods but also in the education of their children.

At first glance, there's little evidence of a problem. More than [75 percent of the population now has internet access](#), according to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). Ninety-five percent of schools also have internet access, with one computer available for every 17 students. Other data, however, showed that most Thais don't have elementary ICT-related skills, such as downloading or installing software.

Worse, according to the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI), [only 21 percent of Thai households have computers](#), much lower than the global average of 49 percent. This is a mismatch with home internet access at 68 percent which is higher than the global average of 55 percent. Part of this discrepancy might be explained by the high rate of internet usage via smartphones, [for which Thailand ranks second worldwide](#). The issue for poorer families isn't related to the internet of things (IoT), but the availability and cost of devices used in the classroom, such as tablets and laptops, which are prohibitively expensive.

TDRI also explains that very few poor Thai households own internet-connected computers. The National Statistical Office in 2017 noted that those with an average annual income of less than 200,000 baht, only three percent had these connected devices, with Bangkok ranked highest at 42 percent-double that of other regions including Central Thailand at 21 percent, 19 percent in the North, and just 14 percent in the Northeast.

COVID-19 exacerbated the problem because those without computers prior to the pandemic could still access the internet from cafes or from other wireless hotspots. The rapid closure of everyday shops and restaurants left many without the resources to get online. And this is where the digital divide extends beyond the scope of the pandemic and into a longer term problem.

The Ministry of Education has yet to determine a more sustainable and affordable path to ensure access to the internet for low-income families. Part of this [was conceived as a campaign ploy by Yingluck Shinawatra](#) as she sought to become Thailand's first female prime minister. While the effort to provide tablet PCs into the homes of every Thai family was [roundly criticized by Thai and international media](#), the motivation to provide assistance to the most vulnerable households was real, even though the much-needed reforms to the Thai national curriculum and related systems were neglected.

It wasn't that this hadn't been tried in the past with other governments. Former Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyuth tried to initiate a policy of providing all schools across the country with computers. The goal was nationwide coverage, including that of schools in remote areas. Unfortunately, the results were less than acceptable as the necessary infrastructure to keep computers working-such as competent staff, electrification, and a suitable curriculum to accommodate them-was lacking.

It does not, however, change the need for access, as remedies to the digital divide in Thai schools

should involve government assistance to students who lack computers for online education. To many, this would come with a sticker shock, as subsidies would likely exceed 30 billion baht. As [95 percent of primary children in Thailand are now attending classes regularly](#), this would invite biting criticism.

Yet for poor Thai families, the burden of both providing stable internet access and multiple devices that are capable of processing and handling classroom information is too much to bear. [Recent pleas by teachers](#), signed by thousands of Thais, represent the current state of affairs. They begged the Ministry of Education to provide computers and tablets as well as access to the internet for students and teachers—all suffering as a result of COVID-19. While all provinces have suffered due to the pandemic, the most vulnerable families are those that need remedies from the government.

Other countries are already rolling out programs to help diminish the effects. Singapore has initiated a programme that will put [tablet devices into the hands of all secondary students by 2028](#), with a subsidy for purchase. The British government is stepping up efforts to put laptops in the hands of disadvantaged children, with [as many as 700,000 delivered by January of this year](#).

While it might be now too late to accelerate the closing of the digital divide during the current pandemic, it is never a bad investment to curb the social and economic inequality that COVID-19 has made more prominent. Thailand must make clear its stand by making solid investments in internet infrastructure, information and communication technology (ICT), and psychosocial support to students lingering in poorly-implemented online instruction.