

SXSW EDU Highlights Important Trends Driving Home Broadband

Parent portals, out-of-classroom resources, eSports and user-created content were hot topics at this year's conference.

By Rollie Cole / *Sagamore Institute for Policy Research*

SXSW EDU, the education offshoot of South by Southwest, reassembled in person in 2022 after two years of meeting virtually.

The “little sister” of the big SXSW, SXSW EDU usually draws just under 10,000 to Austin, Texas; “big brother” SXSW, with tracks for music, film and interactive, draws almost 200,000. SXSW EDU focuses on education, which **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** has identified as a key driver of demand for fiber to the home (FTTH). The conference usually includes content related to that increased demand for FTTH. This year was no exception.

Three trends in education are directly increasing demand for FTTH and will continue to do so even if the pandemic recedes to a memory. Two developments outside education per se will also drive demand. Here's a look at the trends highlighted at the conference.

PARENT PORTALS

Even as recently as two or three years ago, almost none of those who created the technology on display at SXSW EDU had given much thought to the role of the “supervisor of students.” The supervisor is usually a parent for school-age students but might be an employer for adult-age ones. This year, several technology offerings had an explicit role for the “parent” – specifically, parent portals.

A parent portal is usually a separate way to log in to an app, showing measures of student

progress relative to time, other students and the material being taught. Using such a portal, a “parent” can track student progress without having to know the subject matter or even much about learning and teaching.

In an employment context, the “parent” might use the technology at work. But for school-age students, the parent will almost always log in from home. The bottom line is that many more of these products exist, leading to more demand, and widening the digital divide where that demand is not met with appropriately robust supply – FTTH or something almost as good.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Social-emotional learning (SEL) was a big buzzword throughout the conference. The need for remote education during the pandemic put a huge spotlight on a problem already receiving growing recognition. Students struggling with social or emotional issues have a hard time learning more traditional academic topics.

The pandemic directed attention to the wide range of home environments – including the stark reality that many students don't have parents, food or heat at home, much less broadband. At the same time, some students thrived in a remote environment, removed from classroom issues such as bullying or shabby clothing.

The conference sent a strong signal that attention to SEL would grow as students came



back to classrooms, whether full-time or part-time.

Addressing SEL will require more attention to the variety of in-home environments. It will also increase the demand for technology with parent portals to get parents or supervisors involved.

OUT-OF-CLASSROOM RESOURCES

The third trend showed up in a variety of products that attempt to connect students with resources outside the classroom, even when students are in class or in school. Such resources might include accessing subject matter experts or connecting students with people in advanced careers of interest. Other resources include museums, geographic sites and special ed and counseling resources students might otherwise avoid because of the stigma.

The demand is not just in classrooms but also in every place students might want or need to access those resources. Resources being accessed, such as museums and geographic sites, might need more sensors, cameras and connectivity than otherwise.

ESPORTS

One big development that might not be deemed education per se is

eSports. Competitive videogame playing, and watching others play videogames, continues to grow quickly. It is developing along the same lines as professional physical sports. Many people watch a few highly paid professionals. But the system that produces those professionals includes a growing network of those playing videogames starting in elementary school and continuing beyond college.

The relatively new twist is the growing percentage of videogaming that does not take place at home, alone in the dark playing against the machine. People play against other players, often in formally organized tournaments. Those promoting eSports make a big deal about all the nonplayer roles – game developer, marketer, tournament organizer and others – that are and can be done by students or people who are not themselves professional-quality game players.

Game players need high-quality practice environments, usually in their homes. Promoters can use robust broadband at home and other places to do their jobs, such as development or marketing or organizing.

CREATOR ECONOMY

Two speakers from Variety Intelligence Platform, Andrew Wallenstein and

Gavin Bridge, gave a fascinating presentation on “The Future of Content.” (Watch the video here: <https://tinyurl.com/3yzspbsz>.) The presentation covered the large and growing interest in listening to or playing with user-created content, which is not available on traditional broadcast media and is mostly created at home – or in tiny offices, not inside schools, large corporations or agencies. Anyone younger than 25 consumes more user-created content than traditional content, and even 22 percent of the content those older than 55 consume is user-created.

In earlier articles, I called teaching (education), health and entertainment *the* drivers of demand for home-based broadband. The pandemic has added employment to that list. The news from SXSW EDU shows that education and entertainment are continuing to create more demand for home broadband. ❖

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