T-MOBILE FOR EDUCATION

Sustaining student connectivity: Toolkit for educators

Tips, resources, and guidance for creating a strategic plan

PROJECT 10MILLION

Introduction

For K–12 students in modern curricula, online connectivity is essential to enable learning. Without it, students fall within the digital divide—the disparity between students with and without access to computers, internet connections, and online educational content and instruction.

A recent EdWeek Research Center survey notes that between 9 million and 12 million U.S. students still lack adequate internet access at home for remote learning.[1] Because of this, the National Center for Education Statistics estimates that 9 million children ages 3 to 18 have difficulty completing online assignments.[2]

> "Think about access. Think about the infrastructure so we can continue to improve communications and social economic mobility throughout our communities, so we can improve opportunities for educational access."
>
> — Mordecai Ian Brownlee, Ed.D President of the Community College of Aurora

The internet is a necessity for nearly everyone in the U.S. For students, it's essential for the new reality of remote learning. Hybrid and asynchronous models are expected to stick around for good.[3]

At T-Mobile® for Education, our mission is to help close the equity gap so that students can fulfill their full potential. That's why we created initiatives like Project 10Million™, which aims to sustain education and bridge the digital divide by offering free wireless service to 10 million U.S. homes with eligible students.

This toolkit is designed for educational administrators, teachers, school IT staff, parents, and anyone else interested in forging a sustainable strategy for connecting students and families to digital resources. People who are denied access from internet technology are at a disadvantage in education, employment, healthcare, and many other aspects of daily life. With the right vision, strategy, partnerships, plan, and passion, every community in America can help ensure that no student is left behind.

1 EdWeek
2 National Center for Education Statistics
3 "Digital Equity: Supporting Students & Families in Out-of-School Learning," Consortium for School Networking, 2018.

Step 1

Create an educational connectivity taskforce

Many schools and districts create public and private partnerships to acquire funding for remote learning. These partnerships combine private sector technology and innovation with public sector incentives—ensuring the timely completion of work within budgets.

Sustaining those partnerships and creating new ones will allow more students to benefit. Digital equity should be viewed as a community-wide goal that supports everyone, not just students. With disparities in education apparent and the benefits of digital transformation clear, chances are that contributors—from elected officials to business, university, and religious leaders—may be interested in volunteering their time, expertise, and resources.

To increase digital equity among students, start by creating a taskforce to assess student connectivity needs in your district. The taskforce may include parents, students, school personnel, elected officials, organizations, and companies. Some may already be working on addressing the digital divide and others may want to help define and implement new solutions. While assembling a taskforce, take note of what related initiatives might already be underway and how those initiatives can fit into your strategy to avoid duplicating efforts.

Organizations to include in taskforce:

- Schools
- School board members
- Colleges and universities
- Public libraries
- Youth and family service organizations
- Religious institutions
- Private citizen stakeholders
- Parent groups
- Businesses
- Government
- Chambers of commerce
- Local foundations

Step 2

Create a vision

A vision for district-wide student connectivity should directly target the actual need. It should have a measurable impact on the lives of underserved students and families.

Define the connectivity needs in your district by creating and disseminating a survey to students, parents, teachers, and the greater community. This data will help quantify the problem and potential costs to address digital equity issues. The vision should encompass the current state while articulating the future state. This step requires collecting and analyzing data.

The vision should describe what success looks like by offering measurable outcomes. These could include metrics—such as the percentage of students fully equipped with devices enabled with internet connectivity, high school graduation rates, and scholastic testing results—plus more qualitative, anecdotal reviews from teachers who see their students succeeding. Yearly surveys are a good way to stay up to date on how student connectivity efforts are progressing and what benefits they are providing long-term.

"Having a vision allows the leader to see the finish line so they can build strategies for their team to overcome the obstacles on the way."

—Olivera Jankovska, MSc, Director of Education
Office of Mayor Sylvester Turner, City of Houston

"Identifying students who may not have connectivity to internet resources away from school is the first critical step. Surveys can assist with this effort and are a non-intrusive approach."

— Jay Parker, Certified Chief Government Officer and Chief Technology Officer, Union County Public Schools, South Carolina

Questions for your connectivity survey might include:

- What types of devices do students need?
- How many students are utilizing the same devices available at home?
- What type of online and educational activities are the students doing at home?
- Who lacks internet access?
- What are the different ways of connecting to the internet and how much would they cost?
- Where do students spend time in the community outside of the classroom and home?
- What free Wi-Fi, hotspot, or other resources exist currently at libraries or other public places suitable for studying or learning?

Step 3

Assess resources

What devices, software, connectivity, and expertise will your district need? Who will keep track of inventory and provide logistical support—including receiving and shipping devices and upgrading software? Who will provide professional development for the teachers on technology and digital literacy instruction for students? Who will lead digital security efforts? All of these questions should be part of a resource assessment in your plan. Members of the taskforce may be able to answer some of these questions or provide guidance to support implementation.

> "Collecting data and seeking guidance from thought partners is critical, but it's paramount to understand resource inventory. The goal for the district: Ensure that all students receive a quality experience with the innovative use of technology. The assessment helps us move forward."
>
> — Domonic Tong, Executive Director of Technology
> Aldine Independent School District, Houston, Texas

When planning for connectivity needs, consider that a study by the Consortium for School Networking found that 85% of network traffic in remote learning is used for video.[4] Also, students in remote or rural areas typically have poor internet access across the region, but connectivity problems persist in large metropolitan areas as well. The learning experience is also greatly impacted by the age, type, quality, and configuration of devices. The survey recommended in Step 2 will help you know more about your district's needs.

4 Student Home Connectivity Study," CoSN, Spring 2021

Below are organizations that offer a wealth of best practices and expertise in analyzing which resources you may need to increase equity in your district:

BroadbandUSA is a program of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) that seeks to expand broadband connectivity and promote digital inclusion.

Connect Americans Now is a coalition of 250+ organizations and companies committed to eliminating the digital divide in rural areas by supporting policies to clear regulatory barriers, improve broadband, and increase funding.

Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) is an advocacy group that provides information and guidelines to help schools maintain safe and secure digital environments.

EveryoneOn is a national nonprofit organization that helps connect low-income families to affordable internet service and computers.

Schools, Health and Libraries Broadband Coalition is an organization that enables student connectivity by promoting high-quality broadband for institutions and communities.

Step 4

Plan, lead, and communicate

As the adage goes, failing to plan is planning to fail. A plan should include input from everyone on the taskforce, survey data, and feedback from other relevant sources. Deliverables and timelines should be defined for each project stage or ancillary activity. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) may be useful when working with partner organizations. While not a legally binding agreement, a MOU is a document that outlines how two parties have agreed to cooperate to achieve an objective.

Ideally, one project manager should be in charge of and responsible for the district connectivity initiative. This person will manage the schedule, project activities, meetings, and communications. The project manager and the taskforce should meet regularly to evaluate progress, challenges, changes in direction or strategy, and costs. Internal communications to the taskforce and external communications to parents, students, teachers, and other stakeholders should be regular and ongoing to manage expectations.

Schools and districts must evaluate needs comprehensively to better understand how to measure success and hone state School Improvement Plans (SIPs) accordingly.

Here are some tips for developing your school or district's connectivity plan:

- Map free Wi-Fi locations where students can do homework.
- Create a network of community centers with laptops, tablets, devices, and Wi-Fi available to students.
- Work with the public library to provide digital literacy programs.
- Train parents and caregivers, along with students, to track grades and attendance online, set up an email account, and access family support resources.
- Keep computer labs open for students before and after school.
- Work with technology companies to pair students with donated devices.
- Create a mobile hotspot lending program.
- Disseminate information to students and parents about low-cost home internet plans.
- Use E-Rate funding and grants to provide free internet access.
- Install Wi-Fi on school buses.

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T-Mobile for Education

Online tools and curricula for grades K–12 were once viewed with skepticism by many schools and districts. Now they're considered vital components of public and private education. Computer and internet access provides every student with a world of resources. In addition, familiarity with collaboration tools and applications provides students with foundational skills required by businesses and to function in 21st-century society.

Through our Project 10Million program, we're committed to partnering with educators in communities large and small to make sure every student is equipped and connected to learn, grow, and succeed.

Find out more about how your school or district can tap into T-Mobile expertise and services today to help increase equity in K–12 education.

- Project 10Million aims to help bridge the digital divide by offering connectivity for students in 10 million eligible, underserved households at no cost to them.
- T-Mobile for Education seeks to improve access by providing wireless devices and service plans to eligible schools and their students.

"When developing a plan, timelines are the guiding post, scalability is the guiding star, and sustainability is the guiding light. They are all essential parts of an effective strategy. The components work to make a plan operational across multiple school years."

— Dr. Iris Garner, K–12 Education Industry Segment Advisor, T-Mobile for Education