

T-Mobile's Education Initiatives Have Connected 3 Million Students ... And We're Just Getting Started

Students are back in the classroom, but reliable mobile connectivity remains as critical as ever. T-Mobile is committed to ensuring no learner is left behind.

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By Mike Sievert, CEO of T-Mobile

Last school year was anything but normal for America's 56 million K through 12 students. You hear the word "unprecedented" quite a lot, and it really was. A lot of young students are used to structure and routine, and rely on tools at school that they might not be able to get at home like reliable internet connectivity. For those kids, school shutdowns across the country have had impacts that experts are still trying to fully understand.

This issue isn't new — the pandemic just put a glaring spotlight on it. And while most students around the country have returned to in-person learning, the problem persists. While estimates on the number of students who lack reliable connectivity outside the classroom range greatly, what we know for sure is that this issue has affected millions — for many years. Education is meant to be the great leveler in our society, but in order for there to be more equal outcomes, there must be more equal access — and in this case,

that means equal access to broadband connectivity even after students leave school for the day.

It's why, even before the pandemic, T-Mobile saw the potential for taking the tremendous network capacity that our newly merged company would deliver and conceived a program that addresses this important Digital Divide issue, called the "Homework Gap," at a size and scale that is truly historic. It is a program that, to our knowledge, is one of the largest and most ambitious programs ever launched by a non-governmental organization to get kids connected. Our \$10.7 billion Project 10Million, officially launched in 2020, now offers free internet service and free mobile hotspots to under-connected households with school-aged children, aiming to reach up to 10 million eligible households over five years. The program offers school districts free and highly subsidized data plans that they can provide to their students for free.

The timing couldn't have been more critical. When COVID-19 hit, students without reliable digital access were not only left behind — they were completely cut off from the classroom. For our part, the T-Mobile teams that had already worked with school districts across the country kicked into overdrive. And the result was more than 1,000 school districts enrolling in the program, and thousands of individual families with qualifying students signing up directly. All in, T-Mobile has connected **3 million students** nationwide since the start of last year.

One story from Renton School District, a Project 10Million participant just down the road from T-Mobile's headquarters in Bellevue, Wash., underscores the need for this program. After school counselor Sophia Simpson-Verger shifted in-person parent conferences to Zoom, she became concerned when several families failed to appear for their digital sessions. So, she decided to mask up and drop by their homes to find out why. Sophia learned that many of her students didn't have reliable connectivity. Parents couldn't log in to conferences, and students were even using a parent's cell phone to try keep up with remote learning every day.

Imagine attending school on a cell phone. It's heartbreaking but it's also not uncommon. And it persists even after things started returning to in-person learning as we look forward to post-pandemic times. The Digital Divide did not go away as vaccines rolled out. As schools reopened last spring and kids of all ages started to return to the classroom, about two-thirds of US public schools were still doing at least some of their classes from home. And it's a slippery slope. Kids who don't have the tools they need are left behind. And the further students fall behind, the harder it is for them to stay motivated.

Incorporating technology in the classroom has clear advantages as the digital economy grows exponentially, but so far universal access to the tools required to participate

equitably remains out of reach. One major factor is the expense, especially for economically disadvantaged families. In the U.S., families pay an average of \$68 every month just for home internet service, according to **data** from New America. Add in taxes and things like equipment rental fees and the total often increases to \$80 to \$100, depending on where they live. That may not seem like a lot to some people, but for families that live paycheck to paycheck with a myriad of other bills to pay, finding an extra \$100 per month is simply not possible.

If the solution sounds simple — make sure every student in America has broadband service and a device to connect to it — the reality of getting it done is not. But we're making huge strides. I'm proud to say that T-Mobile has been one of the staunchest advocates for universal connectivity. We began our campaign to bridge the divide well before pandemic-induced remote learning turned a nagging issue into a full-blown crisis — and we're not stopping now. Programs like Project 10Million are crucial for young people across the country. As our global society becomes more reliant on internet technology, we can't take it for granted that everyone everywhere can get online whenever they need to. Last month, I shared another blog about **T-Mobile's commitment to closing the Digital Divide for ALL**. No American — regardless of their economic circumstance, and whether they live in an urban or rural area — should be left behind.

As I see it, T-Mobile has an important role to play in eliminating the Digital Divide in this country permanently — so every student in America has access to the connectivity they need. As much as we've done so far to connect millions of students across the country, there are millions more to go. Now, we look ahead to Project 10Million's second full school year — and we're just getting started.

To learn more about T-Mobile's Project 10Million or to register your school district for the program, visit www.t-mobile.com/p10m. If you're the parent or guardian of an eligible student, you can register at www.t-mobile.com/project10million.

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