As more than 55 million students stay home from school in a historic move to contain COVID-19, educators have been working tirelessly to keep students connected to online resources and the new digital classroom.

And as school districts across the nation have moved to full-time distance learning environments, making sure that students have access to technology is more critical than ever. It’s essential that we work to bridge the digital divide and help ensure all students can continue learning, even while outside the traditional educational atmosphere.

In these times of uncertainty and evolving work and school environments, helping your school district provide a safe and secure distance learning environment is a top priority for us. Continuity of education—and digital equity—is a must. And it’s more important than ever to make sure we’re all connected and prepared.

Background information: CARES Act funding support for K-12 schools

With the CARES Act and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund having passed in March 2020, school systems have an unprecedented opportunity to develop distance learning programs while extending connectivity to underserved communities.

According to the Department of Education¹, more than $13.2 billion in emergency relief funds are available to state and local education agencies to support continued learning for K-12 students whose educations have been disrupted by COVID-19. Leaders in the education space have the flexibility to use the CARES Act’s ESSER funds for immediate needs, such as tools and resources for distance learning solutions, ensuring student health and safety, and developing plans for the next school year.

In addition, the CARES Act establishes the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER) Fund totaling more than $2.9 billion. Both funds are available to public and non-public, non-profit schools.
Distance learning solutions

To confront this growing crisis, T-Mobile for Education can help schools start a distance learning program in as little as two days so they can continue educating students from virtually anywhere.

We know that every student needs equal access to educational resources to succeed academically. T-Mobile for Education can provide connectivity to students, educators, and administrators, even in rural areas and in underserved communities. And we offer a comprehensive selection of data, access, and mobility options. See pricing and details here.

Our distance learning program options include:

**Complete connect**
For students and staff without a device or internet access, we offer a complete package that includes a device, a hotspot, and connectivity services.

**Data connect**
For students and staff with Wi-Fi-capable devices, but without internet access outside of the classroom, we can provide a hotspot to help students and teachers stay connected.

**Mobile connect**
For students and staff without a device or internet access, we can provide connectivity services and cellular-enabled tablets.

**SIM connect**
For students and staff that have access to cellular-enabled devices but are not currently subscribed to a mobile internet service, we can provide a SIM-only plan.

Distance learning & the digital divide

Efforts to reduce the spread of COVID-19 have emphasized our nation’s digital divide in some truly profound ways. The sudden transition to distance learning and web-based education models stands to further disadvantage kids living in rural America or lower-income urban communities. The lack of home broadband and affordable computing devices means these kids may not be able to take part in standard instruction, causing them to fall further behind and potentially experience life-altering consequences as a result.

We know that being connected to high-speed, affordable internet and reliable wireless services can play a critical role in helping people sustain some level of normalcy in their lives right now, especially for members of already marginalized and vulnerable communities. For kids in these households, the challenges of limited financial means not only stand in the way of their enjoyment of life, but right now, it means they could lose out on valuable hours of instruction, connection to teachers and classmates, and new possibilities for existence beyond their everyday reality.

Improving access to education

Without access to a device and an internet connection, millions of kids will miss out on educational opportunities and even the basic ability to stay in touch with classmates and friends. In normal times, that has a huge impact on their ability to learn. In times when the classroom moves entirely online, it’s debilitating for their learning.

According to the Pew Charitable Trusts, 15% of students don’t have access to a reliable high-speed internet connection at home. And that rises to 35% for households earning less than $30,000.

Furthermore, Pew Research notes that more than five million families with school-aged children lack home internet connectivity. And 25% of households earning less than $30,000 don’t have access to a home computer, widening the digital divide even further.
Closing the learning gap

Just two short months ago, we thought of this increasingly difficult issue as the Homework Gap.

Because 70% of America’s teachers assign homework to be completed online2, but more than five million families with school-aged children do not have reliable internet connectivity at home.

This disconnect has led to dramatically inequitable outcomes among our students. 49% of students failed to complete assigned homework that required internet access, and 42% of students received a lower grade because they lacked internet connectivity. Even in cases where there was an internet connection, students were also hobbled by two additional factors:

- Multiple students in the same household were forced to work from a single computer
- The connection offered very low bandwidth (i.e., dial-up speeds) and was not adequate for completing homework assignments

Of course, under stay-at-home measures, it’s clear that the Homework Gap has become something even greater—it’s now become the Learning Gap.

Students and educators need partners with the expertise in making it all work seamlessly, including implementing 4G LTE and 5G tools for conducting classes online, so educators and students aren’t solely dependent on a home internet connection. They also need devices to access those services, like mobile phones, connected laptops, hotspots, and tablets. And they need increased network performance, expanded capacity, and activated emergency response plans.

Technology is a critical need for our students to continue their education while learning at home, and D.C. Public Schools is proud to work with partners who can help us ensure that families have the resources they need in this unprecedented moment.

–Lewis D. Ferebee, Washington, D.C.
Public Schools Chancellor

Giving every student access to the tools of education

The question is how schools can help meet the digital equity needs of all students, leaving no one out of the learning process just because they lack the technology and connectivity. Because students with a reliable connection at home can participate in classroom learning and complete assignments without a second thought. But those without adequate internet access will fall further and further behind their peers.

Now, there’s increased hope we can solve this institutional problem once and for all. Under the ESSER programs, school districts qualify for grants to help them:

1. Extend internet connections to under-served households, whether those households are in hard-to-reach rural communities or the students’ families are simply unable to afford service.
2. Provide hotspots (take-home internet connections) as a means to connect to 3G and 4G networks.
3. Offer devices, such as cell phones, tablets, and laptops to families in need. These offer connectivity that students can use at home and school when it’s safe to return to classrooms. Many of these rugged devices are built to withstand student use (think drops, bumps, and being stuffed into backpacks).
4. Prevent access to inappropriate or illegal sites through content and category filtering (as mandated under the Children’s Internet Protection Act) and parental controls.

These solutions ensure students have access to the widest library of resources possible while helping teachers build interactive, compelling lessons and homework, secure in the knowledge that all students will be able to engage fully.

An additional benefit is that homework completion is likely to improve, leading to additional lesson retention by students in distance learning programs.
Distance learning spotlight: how hotspots can help

Making personal Wi-Fi hotspots available to those who might otherwise have to go without convenient internet access is even more essential in today’s distance learning environment. These hotspots can be loaned temporarily or long-term, filling a need for anyone who requires secure and reliable mobile access at home. Hotspot loans can be done one-by-one to individuals, or they can be part of a larger program.

Hotspot loans can be done one-by-one to individuals, or they can be part of a larger program, such as the adult learning program run by a large Ohio library system.

One advantage of hotspots is that, because they use a private, secure network, they are substantially safer than public Wi-Fi networks, which have inherent security risks. Hotspots also allow several simultaneous users and device connections, so they can be a practical solution for an entire family to use at home or elsewhere.

There are costs for acquiring and maintaining hotspots, which is why funding is an ongoing concern. Often, schools will use a grant or other special funding program to launch a hotspot initiative. Ongoing governmental funding will likely require that school districts provide accurate usage data.

That’s why it’s important for schools to be sure their hotspot provider has a management solution available that can help them track usage data and prove how much the hotspots are being used. The metrics that they establish can demonstrate the impact that a hotspot program has on individuals and communities.

As we emerge from the coronavirus crisis and students move back into traditional school settings, highly active students with lots of after-school activities can also use hotspots that can connect them from virtually anywhere to leverage spare time between activities like club meetings or sports practices. The same is true for rural students who may spend a lot of time on school buses going to and from school; they can connect as they travel and use that time to work on homework assignments.

Universities are also increasingly adopting hotspot programs to help students stay connected from virtually anywhere. Local governments that want to ensure connections for many of their mobile employees, like social workers or field service staff, are doing the same.

What to look for in a hotspot

There are several key points for schools to keep in mind as they consider a hotspot program.

**Mobile device management:** Tracking the hotspot, its usage, its current status, and other basic information is critical. As an example, for libraries, people are just as likely to have an overdue hotspot as an overdue book. The advantage of a good mobile device management solution is that the device can be easily disabled if it is overdue. Then the user who tries to connect is blocked, receiving a message that they need to contact the library to return or renew the hotspot.

**Ample data:** Even if the library or school or other hotspot owner doesn’t want to offer truly unlimited data, they still need to make sure that their hotspot provider isn’t capping the data at such a low amount that users are throttled after only a short usage period.

**Filtering:** Anytime children are involved, it’s critical that access is blocked to objectionable websites. In the case of public libraries, which may not restrict access in their on-site connections, it’s important that the mobile device management system offers the option to activate filters depending upon who is borrowing the hotspot or local community standards. For example, the hotspot program lets you block inappropriate content like gambling, gaming, pornography, or offensive web sites so you can deliver learning programs protected by content filters, track engagement, and create tailored reports.

**Making it simple to install and manage:** Centrally managed hotspot programs make it easy for school administrators to offer broadband access to their communities with minimal administrative hassle or added resources.

A service provider engineer can install the hotspot in as little as a day. Once the hotspot is installed, a dedicated account manager can act as your main point of contact. Monthly business review meetings will make sure your community is getting the most out of their hotspots. And constant account monitoring helps to identify issues and cost savings opportunities. Service partners can work with schools to pull together usage data that can help shape and improve the program, including a full program analysis with recommendations for getting the best value.

Partners can also provide a monthly savings report, which is a great way to prove value to stakeholders, particularly
in the public sector. Concrete evidence of stronger community engagement can help boost school district support and help them acquire and maintain operational budgets.

School officials must work together to help students overcome educational inequality limitations that can hinder the use of technology tools and learning.

Confronting educational inequality
Of course, where there are additional educational inequality considerations and situations that may be outside the reach of access and connectivity, teachers and administrators need to work together to develop solutions that ensure every student can take advantage of initiatives that drive learning.

Overcoming environmental inequalities:
going beyond technology
The increasing use of communications and computer technology in schools is helping students learn the skills they need to thrive in today’s world. And the gains that technology has brought can be further advanced by enhancing teachers’ ability to help students overcome other limiting factors.

This inequality is sometimes rooted in an environment where there are technology “haves” and “have-nots.” But not always. It may stem from students who lack language skills, those who haven’t been exposed to a positive learning environment, a case of the advantaged versus the marginalized, or other reasons.

Most teachers face a class full of 30 or more unique personalities and personal situations daily, and the better they understand the underlying factors in educational inequity, the better they can help educate them.

Once the issue is acknowledged, teachers, school leadership, and IT can work together toward a solution.

That solution can take the form of a combination of strategic planning and professional development, often aided by experienced coaches who can guide a school district through the process of tackling the issue.

Then, when teachers recognize educational inequity in the classroom, they are better equipped to help overcome it, whether that involves improving their personal skills or adapting their learning plans to adjust to the digital equity situations in their classes. It may mean adjusting the ways technology is leveraged, but it could also be a matter of supporting students with social and emotional learning.

How professional development can help
In schools that have embraced this approach and undertaken efforts to improve, like adding teacher and principal training, more than 90% of those who participated were glad they did. The participating educators said the coaching has helped them address professional challenges and is improving their students’ learning and engagement.

They also reported improvements in applying technology in their teaching compared with peers who hadn’t been coached. The results: authentic teaching becomes the focus, with technology as the vehicle, rather than just using the technology because it is there.

The technology issues, after all, may be the ones most easily recognized. In very rural areas, for instance, the lack of advanced broadband infrastructure may limit the use of online tools. In urban areas, there may be many students who don’t have convenient internet access. Each of these aspects combines to widen the digital divide.

Yet these issues often have an obvious solution, even if there are financial and other hurdles involved in obtaining those solutions and putting them to work. It’s the ones that are less easily spotted that require more understanding.

A primary goal of programs that help combat educational inequities is equipping teachers to expertly and effectively assess student knowledge and situations to hone their approach to education. Once teachers can make those determinations, they can see whether certain technologies are the answer or if there is a great impact coming from the way those technologies are being used.

Preparing for tomorrow
In a 24-hour-a-day world of information, it is critical to work with teachers to better leverage technology and the entire learning process so that we might develop students who are inquisitive, collaborative, and think critically. It is less about particular technology platforms and more about how to refine instructional practices for the best outcomes.

Efforts like this require funding, of course, but more importantly, they require commitment. It takes time to understand educational inequities and develop methods customized to specific schools and student populations that improve everyone’s learning.
It comes down to giving each student the ability to perform at the highest level they can by giving them the same tools, technology or otherwise, as their peers. These tools can help enable them to get their work done, turn in their assignments on time, finish projects, and achieve all that they can despite negative circumstances.

The one-to-one approach

For some schools, the one-to-one approach is being implemented to reduce the digital divide. This strategy puts LTE-connected devices in the hands of every student, along with a telecommunications program that gives students access to high-speed internet at home.

LTE-connected devices provide an always-on, high-speed internet connection, giving students immediate access to school email, the Internet, and online school portals and resource hubs they can use for research and collaboration.

For students, these always-connected tablets or laptops foster continuous learning that goes beyond the classroom. Students can load content-rich material, multitask between assignments, watch videos, run graphic-intensive scientific simulations, and do collaborative school-related video chats with teachers and fellow students.

Technology is the future of the classroom, no matter where learning takes place. Together, we can help you prepare your teachers and students for success.

Program highlights: Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund

In late March, Congress set aside approximately $13.2 billion of the $30.75 billion allotted to the Education Stabilization Fund through the CARES Act for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund.

According to the Department of Education, these grants will be awarded to state educational agencies (SEAs) to provide local educational agencies (LEAs), including charter schools that are LEAs, with emergency relief funds to address the impact that COVID-19 has on K-12 schools across the nation. SEAs in all 50 states, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia are eligible for funding under the ESSER Fund.

Under Title VIII of Division B of the CARES Act, this includes developing and implementing plans for educational services and continued learning whether school campuses are open or closed. The Department encourages SEAs that use funds for remote learning to make strategic investments that promote student achievement through long-term improvements in infrastructure and operations so students may receive educational services.

Grantees must demonstrate their compliance with Section 18003(d), such as any use of funds addressing the digital divide, including securing access to home-based connectivity and remote-use devices, and related issues in supporting remote learning for all students, including disadvantaged populations. SEAs and LEAs are encouraged to support technological capacity and access, including hardware and software, connectivity, and instructional expertise, to support remote learning. They are also encouraged to support remote learning by developing new informational and academic resources and expanding awareness of, and access to, best practices and innovations in remote learning and support for students, families, and educators.

The Department implemented a streamlined process for states to apply for and receive this critical funding by cutting red tape and removing unnecessary delays. SEAs have until July 1, 2020, to apply for ESSER funds by submitting a simple signed Certification and Agreement form to ESSERF@ed.gov.

Note that an entity receiving ESSER funds must, to the greatest extent practicable, continue to compensate its employees and contractors during the period of any disruptions or closures related to COVID-19 in compliance with Section 18006 of Division B of the CARES Act.
For more details, please visit:


https://www.ed.gov/coronavirus

To learn more about how T-Mobile for Education can help your school or school district, please complete this form to be contacted by one of our Education experts.

Footnotes


3 https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/20/the-numbers-behind-the-broadband-homework-gap/

4 Mahsa Bakhshaei, Angela Hardy, Jason Ravitz, and John Seylar. Scaling up classroom coaching for impactful technology use: Results from year 2 of the Dynamic Learning Project.