

# K-12 Connections:

How Schools and Wireless Providers  
Are Partnering to Get Students  
Online During COVID-19

December 2020



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### **Acknowledgments**

Chiefs for Change, a bipartisan network of state and district education leaders, produced this report with support from CTIA, an association that represents the U.S. wireless industry. The information reflected in the report is from Chiefs for Change members' systems, CTIA, media reports, and other publicly available sources. Guilford County Schools and Phoenix Union High School District provided images or opportunities to capture photos used in the report.

## OVERVIEW

When schools closed their doors in March due to COVID-19, educators across the country immediately turned to meeting their students' basic needs: Leaders set up places for families to get meals; distributed critical public health information; provided links to local social service agencies; and transitioned to distance learning. As part of that shift, districts conducted surveys that confirmed what they already knew—an alarming number of students did not have devices and internet connections at home.

With classes taking place entirely online, Americans came together to help address the unprecedented circumstances threatening students' ability to learn. This paper outlines some of those efforts, focusing in particular on the ways in which school systems, state education departments, and wireless providers collaborated to rapidly deploy hotspot connectivity solutions for students and staff during COVID-19.

**Collectively, these initiatives have delivered internet speeds and data amounts to support virtual school-related learning for more than 2.4 million children throughout the course of the pandemic. Without wireless hotspots and emergency assistance, many more students would be locked out of learning.**



Under normal circumstances, a lack of technology and connectivity makes it difficult for children to complete their assignments or participate in learning opportunities readily available to their more affluent peers. But the digital divide has become a full-blown crisis during the pandemic. The problem affects nearly [17 million students](#) across the United States and disproportionately impacts children of color and those from low-income families. As the Alliance for Excellent Education has [reported](#), 34 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native families and about 31 percent each of Black and Latino families lack access to high-speed home internet, compared to 21 percent of White families. From a socioeconomic perspective, [4.6 million](#) families who earn less than \$50,000 per year don't have the internet at home.

School buildings in some communities have reopened. Yet the dire need for technology and home internet remains, and COVID-19 has catalyzed new efforts to connect students. In the coming pages, we highlight partnerships between members of Chiefs for Change, a bipartisan network of school superintendents and state education leaders, and the U.S. wireless communications industry that aim to bridge the connectivity gap.

In a recent survey, members of Chiefs for Change identified ending the digital divide as their top policy priority. Throughout the pandemic, the organization has provided direct technical assistance to chiefs; disbursed \$700,000 for projects in Chiefs for Change members' systems; developed a wide range of partnerships to support innovative ways of delivering the internet to students' homes; and advocated at the federal level for universal broadband. The U.S. wireless industry has launched new initiatives and adapted or expanded prior offerings. Through monetary gifts as well as donated or reduced-cost equipment and service plans, the nation's wireless providers have played a critical role in the effort to ensure students are able to participate in online classes and do their schoolwork.

These partnerships between education systems and the telecommunications industry are an important part of the work to end the digital divide. But, to be clear, they are not enough to fully solve the problem. Longer term, the lack of universal internet access is a national issue that needs a national solution. **The federal government must work with school systems, companies, states, and others to enact a plan for universal broadband.**

## Education Leaders' and Wireless Providers' Rapid Response to Connectivity Gaps

In the early days of the pandemic, systems leaders and wireless providers immediately began working to respond to students' urgent need for connectivity.

For instance, in Rhode Island, the state commissioner of elementary and secondary education, Angélica Infante-Green, a member of Chiefs for Change, [worked with](#) Gov. Gina Raimondo and asked her to: “Call Verizon, call T-Mobile, call Sprint . . . have them give us free hotspots.” As Infante-Green said, “That happened, overnight.” The state partnered with wireless providers, and, in a matter of weeks, families with cell service from Verizon, T-Mobile, and AT&T were able to use the wireless hotspot feature on their phone to connect computers and tablets to the internet, free of charge and with no usage or overage fees.

When District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) closed earlier this year, T-Mobile helped implement school leaders' plan to distribute connected devices for at-home learning, providing 5,000 hotspots. Chiefs for Change board member and DCPS Chancellor Lewis Ferebee [said](#), “Technology is a critical need for our students to continue their education while learning at home, and DCPS is proud to work with partners who can help us ensure that families have the resources they need in this unprecedented moment.”

## Wireless Hotspots: The Fastest Way to Get Students Connected to the Internet

Through partnerships with wireless providers, schools used various kinds of wireless hotspots to efficiently connect their students. These included mobile hotspots, prepaid hotspots, public Wi-Fi hotspots, and buses that were equipped with hotspots and parked in neighborhoods where families didn't have service. Many of the hotspots came with unlimited or low-cost data plans.

Education leaders found wireless connectivity solutions to be a rapid and effective way to get the internet into the hands of students. Wireless hotspots are easy to distribute, easy to install, and easy to use—and wireless providers have been engaged partners with schools and education agencies. “When we announced last summer that our schools would remain closed through the first semester of this academic year, a quarter of our scholars didn't have access to the internet,” said Chiefs for Change member Errick Greene, who is superintendent of Jackson Public Schools in Mississippi. “Those without a device and a connection at home were using paper learning packets. The donation we received from [T-Mobile](#) makes it possible for our students to do their schooling online. We were able to distribute the hotspots quickly, and now our students can learn from their teachers and engage with their peers in real time.”

Experience this year has shown that wireless hotspots with robust data plans—offering approximately 30 GBs/month—serve as a rapid solution for connecting individual students



and provide sufficient internet connectivity for most online learning. For instance, in order to “address the increased need for bandwidth at schools as they move into a fully virtual environment,” T-Mobile [offered](#) school districts 100 GBs/month, roughly “triple the amount of data . . . used by students in the spring at the start of the pandemic.”

“The hotspots and data plans we got from AT&T and Verizon provide the bandwidth our students need for a full day of online classes, video streaming, and an engaging remote learning experience,” Indianapolis Public Schools Superintendent and Chiefs for Change member Aleesia Johnson explained. “In my district, where 50 percent of students previously lacked the devices and Wi-Fi for meaningful distance learning, this support from wireless partners has been invaluable.”

Bringing the power of wireless connectivity to students during the pandemic has garnered praise from policymakers, too. As Federal Communications Commissioner Geoffrey Starks noted, “I have seen great work that the wireless industry has done throughout the pandemic, particularly for students who are from vulnerable communities, when connectivity has become more critical than ever.”

## Collaborative Connectivity Partnerships Across the United States

The stories mentioned above are but a few instances of how U.S. wireless providers have helped get students connected to the internet. Over the past nine months, education chiefs and wireless industry leaders have made a real difference, connecting more than 2.4 million students during COVID-19. The wireless providers have built on long-standing partnerships with education systems and have forged new collaborations.

- ➔ T-Mobile has connected 1.6 million students in more than 3,000 districts since February. In [September](#), the company launched Project 10Million, which [promises](#) 100 GBs of free high-speed data and at-cost devices for participating school districts. The program costs \$10.7 billion, at the equivalent value of approximately \$500 annually per student household.
- ➔ Since March, AT&T has provided connected devices and hotspots to nearly 400,000 students across 44 states. The carrier also established a \$10 million Distance Learning and Family Connections Fund to give parents, students, and teachers tools they need



for at-home learning and expanded eligibility for its low-cost Access from AT&T program in 21 states. In addition, AT&T allowed qualifying schools to activate new lines on qualified data-only plans for school-issued tablets and 4G LTE-enabled laptops and hotspot devices, as well as offered wireless data service at no cost for 60 days.

The company [announced](#) a series of new initiatives in November: For a limited time, it is offering a two-year, \$15-a-month unlimited wireless data plan, with a free hotspot, for students at more than 135,000 schools across the country. It also pledged \$10 million to Connected Nation to provide free internet connectivity and devices to underserved communities. In order to support educators, AT&T is giving teachers a discount on their personal wireless service and is offering free products to support virtual classrooms with filters for unsafe content and malicious sites.

→ Verizon has provided discounted connectivity to 36 million students across 38 states and the District of Columbia. The company offers service plans with unlimited 4G LTE internet access, mobile device management, and other features at a reduced cost. Beyond its distance learning partnerships, the

company [stated](#) that its Innovative Learning program focused on supporting Title I schools will expand to an additional 101 Title I middle schools across the country. The expansion will reach more than 56,000 children for a total of 350,000 students served since the program began in 2012.

- U.S. Cellular eliminated overage charges for customers on smartphone legacy plans, including Shared Connect and other postpaid and prepaid plans with data limits, so customers could use the data they needed without worrying about their bill. The carrier also provided certain customers with an extra 15 GBs of hotspot data to adjust to shifting and varying work arrangements and eliminated data limits on all high-speed internet plans.
- CTIA, an association representing the wireless communications industry, launched its Connecting Kids Initiative, which allows districts to submit their connectivity needs and establish partnerships with the wireless operators in their communities.

The digital divide is expansive, but U.S. wireless providers have delivered critical, short-term supports.



## Partnerships between Education Systems Led by Members of Chiefs for Change and U.S. Wireless Providers

Education System	Wireless Partner(s)	Project Details
Aldine Independent School District, Texas Superintendent LaTonya Goffney	AT&T, Verizon	<a href="#">AT&amp;T and Verizon</a> are both offering reduced-cost internet options for qualifying households. The district has also purchased devices from T-Mobile through the Texas Education Agency's Operation Connectivity program.
Baltimore City Public Schools, Maryland CEO Sonja Santelises	T-Mobile, Verizon	Baltimore City Public Schools purchased 15,500 hotspots from <a href="#">T-Mobile</a> and service for six months. The district hopes to extend the service agreements to August 2021 through fundraising efforts. It is also looking to include charter schools under its T-Mobile contract to support them in their purchase of hotspots. In addition, Baltimore City Public Schools is participating in the <a href="#">Verizon</a> Innovative Learning Program, which will provide five campuses with an iPad for every student and teacher.
Boulder Valley School District, Colorado Superintendent Rob Anderson	T-Mobile, Verizon	Boulder Valley <a href="#">procured</a> T-Mobile and Verizon hotspots for students without internet access.
Broward County Public Schools, Florida Superintendent Robert Runcie	Verizon, T-Mobile, AT&T	Five Broward County middle schools are participating in Verizon's Digital Promise Innovative Learning program. <a href="#">Verizon</a> is providing iPads with built-in connectivity and other resources to students in those schools. An additional nine middle schools are in the final rounds of becoming a part of the program's eighth cohort, with another 15 schools set to join the program in the coming months. Broward County has also partnered with Sprint (T-Mobile) since 2017 on the <a href="#">1Million Project (now Project 10Million)</a> to provide mobile and device internet connectivity for low-income students, and the district has partnered with AT&T to reduce the digital divide for home-based internet through <a href="#">Access from AT&amp;T</a> .
Caddo Parish Public Schools, Louisiana Superintendent T. Lamar Goree	AT&T	AT&T <a href="#">provided</a> low-cost internet service to eligible customers.
Chicago Public Schools, Illinois CEO Janice Jackson	T-Mobile, AT&T, Verizon	Chicago Public Schools partnered with T-Mobile to launch <a href="#">Chicago Connected</a> , a program that aims to deliver free home internet service to 100,000 students. In addition, the district is collaborating with AT&T and Verizon on other efforts.
Cleveland Metropolitan School District, Ohio CEO Eric Gordon	AT&T, T-Mobile	<a href="#">AT&amp;T</a> provided free Wi-Fi internet access for a two-month period. <a href="#">T-Mobile</a> is providing 7,500 unlimited data hotspots and \$1 million of in-kind equipment donations over the next two years through its EmpowerED initiative.

Education System	Wireless Partner(s)	Project Details
<p>Colorado Department of Education Commissioner of Education Katy Anthes</p>	<p>T-Mobile</p>	<p><a href="#">T-Mobile</a> committed to providing free Wi-Fi hotspots and up to 100 GBs of data annually to 34,000 low-income households in Colorado.</p>
<p>Denver Public Schools, Colorado Superintendent Susana Cordova</p>	<p>T-Mobile</p>	<p><a href="#">The district</a> received free hotspots through Sprint's 1Million Project Foundation.</p>
<p>District of Columbia Public Schools, District of Columbia Chancellor Lewis Ferebee</p>	<p>T-Mobile, Verizon</p>	<p>T-Mobile provided 5,000 hotspots for students. In addition, three schools are entering their second year of the Verizon Innovative Learning Schools device grant, a 1:1 tablet initiative through Digital Promise.</p>
<p>Everett Public Schools, Washington Superintendent Ian Saltzman</p>	<p>T-Mobile</p>	<p>Through the 1Million Project, Sprint <a href="#">provided</a> hotspots and 10 GBs of data per month for high school students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. The district is hoping to expand this partnership with T-Mobile's Project 10Million and secure 100 GBs of data for students per year at no cost.</p>
<p>Guilford County Schools, North Carolina Superintendent Sharon Contreras</p>	<p>Verizon, T-Mobile, AT&amp;T</p>	<p>Guilford County Schools has a long-standing relationship with Verizon through which the district has purchased cell phones and MiFi units for staff. The district acquired 1,000 Verizon hotspots and 800 T-Mobile hotspots for students. As part of North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper's <a href="#">NC Student Connect initiative</a>, Guilford County Schools has received 12,500 Verizon MiFi units with 12 months of service. In addition, the district worked with AT&amp;T to mount 97 access points on the exterior of school buildings for parking lot connectivity. T-Mobile, a district partner since 2017, continues to provide mobile and device internet connectivity for students from low-income families.</p>
<p>Highline Public Schools, Washington Superintendent Susan Enfield</p>	<p>T-Mobile</p>	<p>The district secured 2,300 hotspots with data plans from T-Mobile and will be receiving more through the provider's Project 10Million.</p>
<p>Indianapolis Public Schools, Indiana Superintendent Aleesia Johnson</p>	<p>AT&amp;T, Verizon</p>	<p>The <a href="#">providers</a> are offering short-term connectivity solutions including devices, free data plans, and Jetpacks.</p>
<p>Jackson Public Schools, Mississippi Superintendent Errick Greene</p>	<p>T-Mobile</p>	<p><a href="#">T-Mobile's</a> Project 10Million provided free Wi-Fi hotspots.</p>
<p>NOLA Public Schools, Louisiana Superintendent Henderson Lewis, Jr.</p>	<p>T-Mobile</p>	<p>Through its contract with T-Mobile, NOLA Public Schools is providing unlimited smartphone data to all current subscribers, and increased the data allowance to schools and students using the company's digital learning programs.</p>



Education System	Wireless Partner(s)	Project Details
<p>Oakland Unified School District, California</p> <p>Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell</p>	<p>T-Mobile, Verizon</p>	<p><a href="#">T-Mobile</a> has a continuing partnership with the district and provided more than 10,000 hotspots to students.</p> <p><a href="#">Verizon</a> contributed to the district's campaign focused on providing computer and internet access for all students.</p>
<p>Ohio Department of Education</p> <p>Superintendent of Public Instruction Paolo DeMaria</p>	<p>AT&amp;T</p>	<p>AT&amp;T is <a href="#">providing</a> free or discounted service to eligible customers.</p>
<p>Orange County Public Schools, Florida</p> <p>Superintendent Barbara Jenkins</p>	<p>T-Mobile</p>	<p>The <a href="#">T-Mobile</a> partnership supports tens of thousands of free hotspots and data for middle and high school students.</p>
<p>Phoenix Union High School District, Arizona</p> <p>Superintendent Chad Gestson</p>	<p>T-Mobile, Verizon</p>	<p>T-Mobile and Verizon provided free or reduced-cost hotspots and reduced-cost data plans.</p>
<p>San Antonio Independent School District, Texas</p> <p>Superintendent Pedro Martinez</p>	<p>Verizon</p>	<p><a href="#">Verizon</a> is providing iPads to 3,100 students and 190 teachers.</p>
<p>The School District of Palm Beach County, Florida</p> <p>Superintendent Donald Fennoy II</p>	<p>T-Mobile</p>	<p>T-Mobile has been <a href="#">providing</a> free or reduced-cost data and Wi-Fi hotspots to eligible customers.</p>
<p>The School District of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania</p> <p>Superintendent William Hite, Jr.</p>	<p>AT&amp;T</p>	<p>Public AT&amp;T <a href="#">hotspots</a> are available throughout the city for all individuals.</p>
<p>Tulsa Public Schools, Oklahoma</p> <p>Superintendent Deborah Gist</p>	<p>Verizon</p>	<p>Through a competitive grant process, the district received nearly 11,000 <a href="#">Verizon</a> Unlimited 4G LTE data plans and Jetpacks, which the state was able to purchase at a discounted rate. Through its 1Million Project, Sprint provided 328 free hotspots and data service to students.</p>

*The information in this table was obtained from Chiefs for Change members' systems, CTIA, and publicly available media reports.*

## Innovative Cross-State Frameworks for Deploying Wireless Hotspots

One of the ways that education systems are collaborating with wireless providers is through cross-state frameworks designed to simplify and streamline how schools procure devices and hotspots from Verizon. The Georgia Department of Education is coordinating a partnership to connect up to 12.5 million students in that state and 10 others, while the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is leading an initiative that covers up to 4.7 million students in eight states and the District of Columbia. The largest such partnership, with the Texas Education Agency (TEA), will help connect up to 18.9 million students in that state and 15 others. As [this article](#) notes, computer manufacturers are offering hardware at deep discounts to TEA and other state education agencies in the partnership, while T-Mobile, AT&T, and Verizon are “providing hotspot devices that turn connections on their cellular networks into Wi-Fi networks that can be used in homes, along with unlimited, full-speed data plans.”

TEA is handling purchasing and distribution, with local school districts sharing the costs. The opportunity to buy in bulk is supporting systems like Houston’s Aldine Independent School District, where Chiefs for Change member LaTonya Goffney is superintendent.

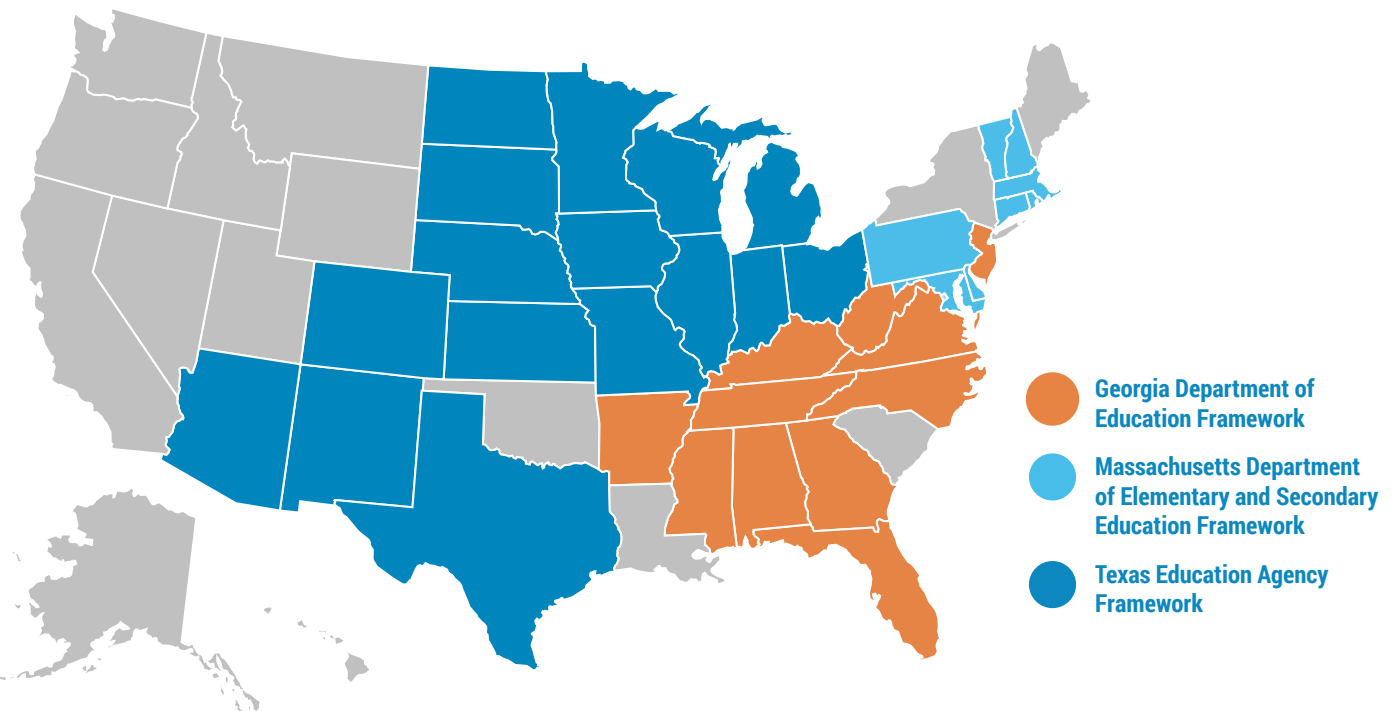
In Aldine, more than 80 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-priced meals, and more than 30 percent of children do not have Wi-Fi at home. Cross-state frameworks are helping individual districts deal with supply chain challenges and are [getting](#) students the technology they need to learn this school year.

## CARES Act Funding to Support Educational Connectivity

A major portion of the funding for the technology purchased through the cross-state partnerships and other initiatives was allocated through the [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security \(CARES\) Act](#). Signed into law March 27, 2020, CARES included \$13.5 billion for K–12 education specifically, with an additional \$3 billion to be used for education at governors’ discretion. Prior to passage of the legislation, Chiefs for Change [advocated](#) for a federal stimulus package with money for technology, personal protective equipment, mental health services, and robust learning opportunities and interventions. School systems are leveraging CARES funding and new partnerships with wireless providers to get students connected.

Chicago Public Schools, under the leadership of Chiefs for Change board member Janice Jackson, for example, launched a groundbreaking \$50-million initiative to bring

### CROSS-STATE FRAMEWORKS FOR DEPLOYING WIRELESS HOTSPOTS



free, high-speed home internet to 100,000 students in need over the next four years. The project is one of the largest and longest-term efforts of its kind and is funded in part through CARES Act dollars and support from philanthropic partners. A [press release](#) from the mayor's office explains that phase one of the project will primarily focus on providing wired internet access and extending existing hotspot service for eligible students in temporary living situations. T-Mobile, AT&T, and Verizon are also helping to develop other potential connectivity solutions.

In Oklahoma, where [41 percent of students](#) lack an adequate high-speed connection for online learning, the department of education partnered with Verizon

and applied a portion of the department's \$15.3 million in CARES funding to purchase [50,000](#) hotspot Jetpacks and data plans at a discounted rate. Through Oklahoma's competitive grant process, 175 school districts secured state-purchased devices. Tulsa Public Schools, under the leadership of Chiefs for Change member Deborah Gist, received nearly 11,000 devices to connect children from low-income families in the district. Tulsa Public Schools will pay a monthly fee for unlimited data service for each awarded device for at least six months. Verizon has also committed to providing technical support throughout the year.

## CONCLUSION

America's wireless providers have delivered critical technology and connectivity supports in a time of extreme need. Through coordinated efforts with Chiefs for Change members, the wireless industry continues to expand opportunities and get students resources to learn during the COVID-19 pandemic. While America's schools have relied on support from wireless providers and others in recent months, we as a nation need a permanent solution.

As Baltimore City Public Schools CEO and Chiefs for Change member Sonja Santelises has [noted](#), "In the next 18 months, even under the best circumstance, I can't imagine internet service not being integral to schooling." The federal government must work with industry and others to help provide universal broadband so every child has adequate technology and the consistent, reliable internet service they need to succeed.

