Moderator:	**Texas State Representative Toni Rose**
Panelist:	**Dr. Kiesha Taylor, Senior National Education Administrator at T-Mobile**
Panelist:	**Gabriella (Gaby) Rowe, Grow Associates LLC, and Project Lead for Operation Connectivity**

Voiceover: Welcome to the Women In Government Podcast. Whether discussing important issues, or policies of the day, this is the place where lawmakers and decision-makers unite to get the conversation started.

Representative Toni Rose: Hello, I'm State Representative Toni Rose. Thank you for listening to the latest Women In Government podcast regarding internet connectivity for students all across the country, from big cities to small towns, and everywhere in between.

COVID-19 has not only turned our healthcare and business landscape upside-down, it has also impacted our education system. Approximately 50 million students will attend school from home for at least part of the 2020-21 school year due to the pandemic. This dynamic shift in the method in which education is delivered has brought with it a host of problems, including the fact that millions of students without connectivity are disconnected from virtual classrooms and are wholly unable to participate in school.

Today, we are taking a look at the digital divide in terms of children's inability to complete their homework because of the gap in internet access. The situation it creates for students can easily be referred to as the homework gap. Similarly, with so many children now attending all, or part of their actual school day virtually, what served as the homework gap has morphed into a more pressing schoolwork gap, where students are unable to attend school.

Joining the conversation is Dr. Kiesha Taylor, Senior National Education Administrator at T-Mobile. Dr. Taylor is a former Aldine Independent School District classroom teacher, Director of Online Learning, and Principal of the Aldine virtual school. She came to T-Mobile in 2018 as a Government Account Manager. She also holds a Doctor of Education from Lamar University, a Master's in Clinical Counseling from Sam Houston State University, and a BA in Psychology from Arizona State.

Dr. Kiesha Taylor: Hi Representative Rose, thank you so much for having me on the call.

Representative Toni Rose: Thank you for joining us. We also have Gaby Rowe of Grow Associates LLC and Project Lead for Operation Connectivity in the state of Texas. She's currently working to connect the state's 5.5 million public school students with a device and reliable internet connection.

Gaby Rowe: Thank you so much for having me Representative Rose.

Representative Toni Rose: Thank you for joining us.

Representative Toni Rose: Before we get started, I'd like to thank you for listening to this important discussion. Don't forget to subscribe to, like, or share our podcast. You can also email us by visiting womeningovernment.org.

Last spring, a third of low-income parents said kids were unable to complete their schoolwork at home. That number could easily rise with more remote learning and broader impacts of COVID-19 on family finances. From what I understand, this may not be a new issue, but the pandemic has certainly brought it to the surface.

Dr. Taylor, can you talk a little bit about what the homework gap is?

Dr. Kiesha Taylor: Absolutely, even before the pandemic, more than 9 million of America's 56 million school-age children did not have access to reliable internet and they couldn't complete their after-school assignments. This critical homework gap has tremendous short- and long-term impacts: lower test scores, lower grades, and limited opportunities after graduation. We know that access to the internet is critical and it has an impact on student motivation, attendance, and academic achievement in math, science, and reading. Also, academic vocabulary attainment. So, when we're talking about the homework gap, we're really talking about the opportunity for students to have access to the internet outside of the traditional school day.

Representative Toni Rose: Dr. Taylor those areas are so critical in the students' development, and eventually what will lead to a fulfilling professional life -- we have to do something about it. How did COVID-19 and the increase in full- or part-time remote learning exacerbate the problem?

Dr. Kiesha Taylor: COVID-19 forced up to 50 million students out of the physical classroom and into part- and full-time remote learning. The need for connectivity and greater bandwidth has dramatically increased in the education space. What has traditionally been a homework gap has turned into an even more massive schoolwork gap across the country, where students without internet access are completely left out of learning.

Representative Toni Rose: Left out of learning—an awful result of this uncertain time. From what I'm hearing, it seems students could potentially see doors to opportunities close in front of them through no fault of their own. Dr Taylor, how is this new schoolwork gap impacting students?

Dr. Kiesha Taylor: You're absolutely right. Last spring, one third of low-income parents said kids couldn't complete schoolwork at home. This number could easily rise with more remote learning and broader impacts of COVID-19 on family finances. Experts are using the term COVID Slide to describe students with poor or no internet connectivity that will lose up to 14 months of learning outside of the classroom.

Representative Toni Rose: These days, millions of K-12 students in the United States are learning from home and missing important face-to-face instruction. This has left many parents worried about their child's achievement and whether a gap between high and low-achieving students will become larger.

Outside of these three factors you talked about earlier (lower test scores, lower grades, and limited opportunities after graduation), I'm sure you're hearing a lot more from school districts. What unique challenges are schools facing because of the pandemic?

Dr. Kiesha Taylor: You know Representative Rose, when the pandemic hit, we went into overdrive, talking with thousands of school districts and we consistently heard that they were each facing unique challenges. The shift to online this new school year created a massive pain point as schools struggle to find solutions for their students.

Since March, the new T-Mobile COVID response program has helped connect more than 2 million students nationwide. That's with connectivity, that's with implementation support, and also guidance for deployment. That's also including content filtering to make sure that children have a safer internet experience, and additionally making sure that there is a support line that end users can call. If the parent or the student has a problem, they shouldn't have to call the school. We have a responsibility to make sure that we're supporting them.

In New York City alone, T-Mobile is helping to connect more than 300,000 students with iPads and data when virtual classes resume. We're also partnering with the California Department of Education and Apple to connect up to another 1 million students' virtual learning.

Representative Toni Rose: I understand you've come up with a COVID-19 response program, can you explain what it is and how it is helped schools all across the country?

Dr. Kiesha Taylor: Education has always been a big focus at T-Mobile, just as it was with Sprint. Even before COVID-19, our teams helped solve the homework gap for one-half million students across the country -- that's a huge accomplishment.

At T-Mobile, we believe access to the internet means access to opportunity, and we believe every single child deserves access to that opportunity. So, we zeroed in on a bold goal, helping every single student that's unconnected in the U.S. get access to the internet connectivity that they need to learn; and that's a part of our COVID response program. That program also decreased term options for school districts, it provided a much broader price point, and it also still included all of those key resources that school districts need in order to put devices in the hands of students.

Representative Toni Rose: Our nation's teachers have been struggling and working hard to adjust to this new normal, which likely feels pretty chaotic to them at times. I know educators had to come up with new lesson plans, schedules, and ways to engage with students in non-academic settings -- it hasn't

been easy for them or the students, any help is definitely appreciated. So, I guess I should say, why are you tackling this issue?

Dr. Kiesha Taylor: I've been in education administrator for several years, and even outside of that, just working within school systems to make sure that kids have what they need to be successful. I know that having access to mobile internet makes a tremendous difference in the lives of students. It means that, whether they're staying at grandma or grandpa's house, or they're are at aunt and uncle's during the day, or they're in front of Walmart where mom or dad is on lunch break, or they are on the side of the soccer field at the YMCA. And we have a lot of student-athletes and also students that participate in band that are on buses for several hours after school. And so really tackling the issue of student connectivity is something that's always been very near and dear to me, and that's why I'm in the position of leading our education strategy across T-Mobile. and making sure that this $10.7 billion commitment to connect 10 million students over the next five years, is something that's done in a way that's really beneficial to the student community, through the school districts and state agencies who know where the students have the need the most.

Representative Toni Rose: That's a pretty big goal and has the potential to do some amazing things for our country's youth. I understand that T-Mobile is launching a new initiative to connect students with the internet connectivity they need. What is Project 10Million?.

Dr. Kiesha Taylor: That's a great question. Project 10Million is an unprecedented $10.7 billion infusion into the education space. It's an initiative to connect students who need it the absolute most. Through their school district, Project 10Million provides eligible student households--based on National School Lunch Program--with a free wireless hotspot and free high-speed data, and access to half-off laptops and tablets. And because of COVID-19 and the need for increased bandwidth we've expanded Project 10Million to give school districts even more options. Each eligible student household can still get the 100 gigs per year plan for free, or their school district can apply that same subsidy value of approximately $500 toward low-cost plans that offer more data.

So, one new plan offer is 100 gigs per month, about three times the data we saw used by students at the start of the pandemic. We also have an offer for "unlimited" for those students as well. Where when you think about schools as the hub of the community, unlimited internet access can be used by grandparents taking care of those babies, they may need to access telemedicine, or they may need to order their groceries online. Parents can access unemployment resources or maybe enroll a child into higher education. So those unlimited connectivity options are really critical to making sure that we're supporting the greater community through those students in need. And all of this is still completely free to students because the school districts are the account owners. The interested school administrators or even a parent that's interested in Project 10Million program for their child's school can visit www.t-mobile.com/p10m to get all the information they need about how school districts can connect with T-Mobile.

Representative Toni Rose: Eradicating both the homework gap and school gap is essential for our youth to succeed. Where you live should not determine where you go in life, and your family's income should not determine your outcome. Dr. Taylor, can anyone apply?

Dr. Kiesha Taylor: I totally agree with that. Yes, right now, we're focused on connecting as many eligible students as quickly as we can, so we're working directly with school districts to make that happen. Since the start of a pandemic, we've talked with thousands of school districts to get students connected. Districts understand their unique challenges. They know which students are suffering with homelessness, or may have an additional need, and they know which students need additional support in regard to connectivity. By partnering with educators, our goal is to ensure equitable access for the students that need it the most. We don't want lack of awareness of Project10Million to prevent students from getting key connectivity that they deserve.

Representative Toni Rose: Well, what about entire school districts?

Dr. Kiesha Taylor: It's easy, school district administrators can visit t-mobile.com/p10m and complete and submit an interest form. A T-Mobile representative will then reach out to schedule call and walk through the program details, options, and the formal application process. Once the application process is complete and the school's officially in the program, our team will work with the district administrators to identify eligible students (based on the National School Lunch Program) and get the schools connected to service and the hot spots that they can distribute to their students.

Representative Toni Rose: Currently most state and local leaders are having ongoing discussions about in-person classes after seeing a number of positive cases since schools have re-opened, they're looking for solutions. How can leaders in government help get their school districts involved with Project 10Million?

Dr. Kiesha Taylor: I met with several state leaders across the country--whether it's governors, state commissioners, or broadband commissioners--about Project 10Million and student connectivity. Many of them are really taking the bull by the horns and saying, "we have the funding now, let's get organized around this effort so that we can do this as quickly and efficiently as possible." A lot of states that I've seen are taking the time to do a really in-depth assessment from a network perspective, also from a student-need perspective, and I know that that's critically important.

Another side of this coin that's really important, that I think Gaby Rowe will bring a lot of light on in the conversation, is just the idea that we don't want our planning to really stifle our ability to progress in this area. The key goal is making sure that the connectivity is available for those students. And so, T-Mobile is partnering with both state leaders, as well as school district leaders whether it's a state education agency, or directly to that local education agency, to provide Project 10Million to the student households that have the most needs.

Representative Toni Rose: Research finds that access to a quality internet connection at home is crucial for academic success. We've already heard from Dr. Taylor and great stories from around the country, including on how T-Mobile is helping connect more than 300,000 students in New York City with iPads and data, and how the company is partnering with the California Department of Education and Apple to connect up to another one million to virtual learning.

Now I'd like to welcome Gaby Rowe into the conversation. She's Project Lead for Operation Connectivity in my home state of Texas. You're working with Governor Abbott, the Dallas Independent School District, and the Texas Education Agency to make sure our students stay connected.

What is Operation Connectivity and how is it improving the lives of our state's youth in time of COVID-19?

Gaby Rowe: That's a great question, and again, thank you for having me. Operation Connectivity is a program that was launched by Governor Abbott in May of this year to address connectivity across the state -- not just in the wake of COVID, but more broadly, as we think about the digital divide in the state of Texas. In a nutshell, the goal of Operation Connectivity is to ensure that every single student in the state of Texas is able to connect and to learn remotely from home by the beginning of the 2021-22 school year. And that means having an e-learning device, as well as high-speed internet connectivity that's adequate for learning.

Representative Toni Rose: I understand there are short-, medium-, and long-term goals. Can you tell us some of the details?

Gaby Rowe: Absolutely. Having heard earlier in the program, there are currently 5.5 million students in the state of Texas. At the beginning of COVID, most estimates at this point indicate that 3-3.1 million students were unable to learn remotely at the onset in March. That's a staggering number and having now gone deeper into those numbers through Operation Connectivity, I can say that those students exist in absolutely every corner of the state of Texas. And so, it wasn't one plan and one initiative that was going to enable us to get all of that students connected, and we had to break it into phases.

And the first phase was one that we really dubbed "Triage", which was to get as many devices into students' hands as quickly as we could, over the course of the end of the summer and beginning of the school year. When we first had COVID impact learning in our schools, there was some hope that by the end of the summer, we would return back to normal and students would be back in-person learning. It became very clear to us in July (in late July) that that time frame was not going to be the case, and at best, learning was going to be blended and asynchronous. And so, we set out to work with private partners, such as T-Mobile, who's played an incredibly important role in this effort, to do a bulk purchase of hotspots and keyboard devices for students across the state of Texas. That first phase resulted in 1.3 million devices ending up in the hands of students across Texas in about 10 weeks. So tremendous effort and huge thank you to our partners.

The second phase is to look at the broadband infrastructure for high-speed internet that exists across the state and really begin to map that, so that we can ensure that every student who has access to high-speed internet, can access it in stable way, and adopt that. Quite often, cost and fear are large factors in whether or not a family is able to adopt that service in their home, so we're working with state authorities and districts so that we can make sure that that adoption of existing infrastructure is a reality for families.

The third phase of Operation Connectivity focuses on what we call the "Last Mile", and those are our rural, remote communities and students who don't currently have access to either fixed-internet infrastructure or mobile-internet infrastructure such as the hotspots that we were able to deploy with T-Mobile. For those students, we're looking at innovative technological solutions to bring that service to them, and again, working with private partners such as SpaceX and T-Mobile can make those solutions a reality.

Representative Toni Rose: An LEA (Local Education Agency) survey suggests 17% of Texas students lack access to high-speed internet and 30% lack a dedicated and adequate learning device at home. Gaby, what are a few things that can be done to close the connectivity gap?

Gaby Rowe: Well, I would start by saying we need to re-evaluate those numbers. What we found in Operation Connectivity is that those numbers are actually significantly higher in the state of Texas, and that is a frightening thought when you talk about the impact that Dr. Taylor mentioned earlier in this podcast. So, one of the first things that we believe needs to be done is for us to really pinpoint exactly what that number is, so that our legislators, our private partners, our educators can really fully understand the magnitude of the problem that we are dealing with.

The second thing that has to be done is create simplicity and awareness for adoption for families, so that there is no fear that they will not either be able to afford or fear around providing their personal information and setting up accounts.

And then I think the last piece is ensuring that everyone understands how important connectivity is. We focus on the importance of connectivity around COVID and remote learning, but that COVID Slide that Dr. Taylor mentioned isn't going away anytime soon. And without additional resources for learning outside of the school day--outside of the four walls, that 24/7 learning for our students--we're not going to be able to truly empower them around digital skills and prepare them for the jobs of the future.

Representative Toni Rose: When schools closed back in early spring, about 36,000 Dallas ISD (Independent School District) households did not have connectivity. Thanks to action by the Dallas ISD Board of Trustees, Dallas Education Foundation, and 1 Million Project, the district has distributed more than 15,000 mobile hotspots to Dallas ISD families as of May the first, but more is needed.

Operation Connectivity in Texas has come up with four internet solutions to consider, while trying to solve the problem. I understand it starts with deploying hotspots. Can you provide more detail and the other three options?

Gaby Rowe: Absolutely, hotspots represent a phenomenal solution for students, particularly those that Dr. Taylor described -- as they're on the bus traveling to a sporting event, as they're going between different households, especially students that have high mobility rates, like those in foster care. And after May 1st, we were able to provide another 25,000 hotspots to Dallas ISD to help them with that challenge.

However, hotspots don't represent the kind of stable solution particularly for a household that has three or four students in it throughout the calendar year (not just the school year) that is right for some households. And so, we are looking at a combination of hotspots with fixed internet, and that means the internet that is going directly into a household that's traveling across fiber at very high speeds. And it will enable one family member to be getting online potentially to do something like a telehealth visit for that students who might be living with a home-bound family member or grandparent, while at the same time you have two or three other students doing their homework simultaneously.

And I think the real answer is that no one solution will provide connectivity for everyone, but if we prioritize high-speed connectivity, then we can assure that there is a solution for everyone.

Representative Toni Rose: According to the U.S. Department of Education, "during this pandemic it's important that states, communities, educators, and families are equipped with resources that enable students to pursue their education goals. This includes the ongoing development of guidance and policies related to lifelong learning." Gaby, we have a large listening base made up of state legislators, what do we need to know, and how can we help?

Gaby Rowe: That is a great question and thank you for the opportunity to provide some answers for it. It is incredibly important for our state legislators, and for those beyond on the federal level, to prioritize connectivity as part of our plan for economic empowerment, as part of our plan to create a vibrant and productive workforce for many, many years to come. Without that 24/7 learning, without that connectivity, we cannot make sure that our students grow up to be those productive workers. But we also will have a difficulty ensuring that they stay connected with the broader society around them. So much of what we do is now dependent on that connectivity, whether it is filing forms (our Census for example), Rent Relief form, employment form, or as I mentioned earlier, having a visit with our doctor.

But for us, for Dr. Taylor, for myself, for many of the educators who are working on this problem that starts and ends with the ability for students to live and learn in that world on an ongoing basis; that means for our legislators that it <u>must</u> be a priority. And it's a heavy lift, I think we wouldn't have been talking about this for 25 years if it weren't, but the time has come now for us to begin to think of connectivity as something akin to the rural electrification efforts that we saw a rise up in the 1930s and 1940s. Connectivity, I believe, has now come to that same level of importance and I encourage all of our

legislators to ask questions, to go deep into the data, and to prioritize this for our students for years to come.

Representative Toni Rose: As we wrap up, I must ask for the big takeaways. Dr. Taylor, can we start with you?

Dr. Kiesha Taylor: Sure, the tremendous work that Gaby has done and even thinking about some of the work that you've done Representative Rose, Texas connectivity is a template for closing the student connectivity gap, and identifying digital deserts that desperately need our attention is critical.

The great work that's been done across Texas to make sure that we don't stay stuck in that planning phase and we're really moving forward with getting the devices in the hands of kids is something that can be replicated all over the country. State and school district leaders can leverage T-Mobile's Project 10Million commitment to create strategic and sustainable connectivity for five years for the students that have the greatest need.

Gaby Rowe, and the Texas Connectivity Project was able to use dedicated and donated funding to upgrade the Project 10Million commitment from one year of unlimited high-speed mobile connectivity, while T-Mobile's commitment extended that to ensure that every hotspot has 100 gigs of continued service per year for the next four years.

This is been a tremendous change in the way that we think about any initiative on behalf of marginalized student populations. There's no reason we should only put devices in the hands of students that then become a paperweight after six months, or even a year. So, this is a great opportunity to leverage Project 10Million's commitment to have a five-year sustainable plan on behalf of student connectivity for the students who need it the most across the country.

Representative Toni Rose: Gaby, you have any final remarks?

Gaby Rowe: Absolutely, I'd love to build on what Dr. Taylor suggests that about how Project 10Million shines a light on how we can effectively collaborate for action in the public and private sector. By working directly with the TEA (Texas Education Association), Project 10Million and T-Mobile were able to get 171,000 devices immediately into the hands of students that were already identified as the 15% of students who are most in need. And in that way, partnering together, we can then go to the next level and say, "okay, who needs support next?" We've shown here in Texas that's by centralizing and collaborating, we can partner to solve this challenge and that's what I hope for ahead. T-Mobile, the state of Texas, the TEA, and the Governor's Office have done an incredible job bringing together that collaboration, I hope it serves as an example for many, many others in the months and years to come.

Representative Toni Rose: The past few months have required people of all ages to rethink and reimagine what daily routines look like. This includes millions of students that have been forced into a new way of learning virtually from home. At-home learning has kept students safe but has turned a

homework gap into a schoolwork gap. Experts are now using the term "COVID Slide" to describe students with poor or no internet connectivity that will lose up to 14 months of learning outside of classrooms

Fortunately, there are industry leaders who are stepping up and helping communities all across the country access the internet. Whether you live in a big city, small town, or somewhere in between, where you live should not determine where you're going.

Access to the internet means access opportunity.

Once again, I'd like to thank Dr. Kiesha Taylor and Gaby Rowe for sharing great insights. I'd also like to thank all the listeners for taking the time to hear this important discussion. Don't forget to subscribe to, like, or share our podcast. You can also email us by visiting womeningovernment.org.

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