



Case study

# Fort Wayne delivers remote learning during a pandemic in record time.

**Indiana's Fort Wayne Community Schools district teams up with Verizon to deliver connectivity solutions to thousands of students just in time for a new—and most unusual—school year.**

**verizon**✓

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# Executive summary

**Founded in 1857, Fort Wayne Community Schools (FWCS) has grown to be the largest school district in the state of Indiana. With over 50 K-12 campuses (including a vocational campus) and nearly 30,000 students, FWCS boasts a nearly 90% graduation rate and prides itself on the quality of education it consistently delivers to its student body. However, the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years were an especially difficult challenge that put FWCS to the test. The Coronavirus forced a shift from school instruction delivery at 50 localized educational sites to tens of thousands of residential homes, some of which were even out-of-state due to the pandemic. Here's how FWCS met this challenge by providing maximum connectivity to remote learners at maximum speed of implementation.**

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## **The challenge: Getting kids connected**

In 2015, FWCS developed a one-to-one (1-1) plan, which called for ensuring that every student in the district would have their own device, be it laptop or tablet, by the start of the 2020–2021 school year. By February 2020, FWCS was only 700 devices short of the 1-1 goal, which still gave the district plenty of time to achieve it by the start of the next school year in August 2020. The notable caveat here is that the 1-1 device plan did not assume that all students would have remote connectivity; the goal at this point was to simply ensure that all students had a digital device that they could use for their in-school learning and optionally at home. Not wanting to wait an additional seven months to obtain the remainder of the devices, the school superintendent at the time, Dr. Wendy Robinson, gave the go-ahead to purchase the remaining 700 devices immediately. Little did any of the officials at FWCS know how fortuitous that decision would be. Less than a month later, in March 2020, the Coronavirus was declared a global pandemic.

By the time May 2020 came around, it became evident that the restrictions of the pandemic were shifting from what most people thought was going to be a temporary change to traditional on-site learning to a more permanent, remote learning scenario. This meant FWCS needed to look beyond the 1-1 device goal and more toward the 1-1 connectivity gap. Sure, maybe every student had a device they could use for classroom attendance, but did every student have the connectivity they needed in order to attend virtual classes every day?

**“Based on preliminary survey data, we estimated that roughly 60% of the student body and their families had internet connectivity. Which means 40% of students did not.”**

**– Jack Byrd**  
Chief Systems Officer of FWCS

Jack Byrd, Chief Systems Officer of FWCS, states, “You also have to define what is internet connectivity. Some of the stories we heard were that when we were shut down in Spring of 2020, kids were using their parents’ cell phones.” When parents started to return to the workforce in the fall of 2020, students who were once connected would no longer have that resource.

# The change: Have MiFi, will travel

In its quest to ensure all students could have their own connected device, FWCS found that despite other providers who were offering lower cost connectivity solutions, with the reliability that the students needed at their homes, the lower cost solutions couldn't guarantee that those students would have the connectivity resources necessary to maintain a longer-term remote learning model. Also, there was no guarantee that a student would continue to reside at the same location throughout the upcoming school year (more on that later).

## FWCS needed to find a connectivity solution that achieved the following:



Provide cost-effective, reliable and robust connectivity for qualifying students



Ensure the easiest possible setup for students and families



Connectivity to remain (and travel) with the students



Rapid deployment—within weeks—to ensure no student was left without connectivity when the 2020–2021 school year started

Over the summer months, Byrd and his team reached out to several LAN and broadband providers in the hopes of solving for these needs. None of the solutions that they looked at, however, were able to meet all of FWCS' requirements. Except for one. Says Byrd: "The MiFi is the best solution for us; it goes with the kid."

## The solution: Verizon MiFi 8800L mobile hotspots, lots of them

Determining who the qualifying students were to receive internet connectivity devices at the district's expense entailed understanding how many of them qualified for the federally funded Free and Reduced Lunch program, which, according to Byrd, was roughly 70% (give or take a few points) of families, since a single family may have more than one child in the same school district. Based on these figures, FWCS came to Verizon with an initial order of 7,000 MiFis, to which they later added an additional 500. To help ensure security, each MiFi (i.e., "hotspot") was configured with a Verizon Mobile Device Management (MDM) software solution.



Student demonstrates FWCS hotspot setup during training video.

# The team: Lightning fast deployment

By the time the decision was made in mid-July regarding the attendance plan—in-person, blended or virtual learning—for the 2020-2021 school year, Byrd and his team had a mere two weeks to preconfigure and distribute the first batch of 7,000 MiFis to families, in addition to creating training videos on how to set them up. It was not an easy task—each device had to be unboxed, turned on, configured with MDM software, and repackaged—but one that together, FWCS and Verizon were able to accomplish.

**“We worked night and day with the Verizon team to preconfigure the hotspots and get them ready by the first day of instruction.”**

— Mark Resor  
Senior Technical Support Specialist for FWCS

“And despite the fact that we had shipments coming in from multiple warehouses and shippers, Verizon was still able to track it all and ensure every device got to where it needed to be,” added Mark Resor, Senior Technical Support Specialist for FWCS.

And even when there were problems, by being in constant communication with Resor and his support team, Verizon was able to work quickly to resolve any issues. “We never felt like we weren’t going to make it,” says Resor. “There was always a confidence that we would.”

On the importance of picking a lasting partner, Byrd emphasizes, “The two-week notice is what solidified our relationship with Verizon; they were in the trenches with us and that’s what meant the world to us.”



Warehousing facility where FWCS and Verizon worked to preconfigure devices.

## Going national: Reaching students everywhere in the U.S.

Due to the unique nature of this new and unusual school year, many students had to temporarily move out of the school district, and even the state. FWCS speculates that one of the reasons for this kind of student displacement could have been a result of students needing to stay with relatives (such as grandparents) while parents had to return to work and couldn’t be at home for their children during school hours. Because of Verizon’s nationwide coverage, this challenge was easily overcome by shipping hotspots to students at their remote locations, a solution that would not have been possible had FWCS opted to use a land-based or local Wi-Fi infrastructure. “We had students who were participating from California, Texas, Upper Michigan, east coast, west coast, all over the United States,” begins Resor. “We would have never had that opportunity with a landline provider.”

# The future: Sticking with trusted partners

Pre-pandemic, Verizon and FWCS already had a good working relationship, but the manner in which both Verizon and FWCS were able to come together in such a time of crisis and deliver a big win for the school district was, for Byrd, the mark of a true partnership, grounded by an excellent reputation. “When we do projects, we always open them up to other vendors, but one of the things I always put on our evaluation matrix is the trustworthiness of the vendor. “In terms of how Verizon performed on this project, they get a 10 for trustworthiness. They were there for us after the sale and we’re confident they will be there for us in the future.”

At Verizon, we take pride in the fact that we run to a crisis, not away from it. We are equally as proud to partner with customers such as the tireless and hard-working team at Fort Wayne Community Schools, who continue to help us deliver better results and solutions for students and families. FWCS, you also get a 10.

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## Learn more.

To learn more about Verizon's distance learning solutions, visit us at:

[verizon.com/distancelearning](https://www.verizon.com/distancelearning)



Students demonstrate FWCS hotspot setup during training video.

