



Somerset Area School District offers a lesson in creative problem solving

It's no secret that the global COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on schools across the U.S. during the latter part of the 2020 school year. Somerset Area School District, located 80 miles east of Pittsburgh, PA, was determined to avoid the same chaos when classes began in September. But with 22% of their 2,100 students located in Internet dead zones across the district's large rural footprint, they needed an economical solution to serve 450+ children without access for online learning—all while ensuring safety, security and social distancing.

At a glance



Industry

K-12 school district

Customer

2,100 students

200+ teachers and staff

Challenges

No reliable WiFi connection for students

Mandate for virtual learning

Large rural area to cover

Budget constraints

Windstream Enterprise Solutions

4G LTE wireless service

25 Gb pooled 4G plan

Secure WiFi (outdoor access points)

Professional Services

Results

10 remote wireless access points

WiFi access for 450+ students

Barriers to virtual learning

Given that a quarter of Somerset's households with students don't have reliable Internet service, the mandate to replace in-class learning with online learning was daunting, to say the least.

District officials had been looking at various options to solve the problem, including providing every student with a mobile WiFi device. But that plan proved to be too expensive. Rigging buses with technology to boost signal wasn't feasible, either.

According to Judy Maxwell, the district's director of curriculum and technology, that's when Windstream Enterprise reached out to the district with a solution.

Windstream Enterprise Regional Account Director Brian Miller said, "The district recognized early on that providing broadband access to students would be a challenge and proactively sought an innovative solution."

A Windstream Enterprise Professional Services field team was deployed to help get the project off the ground.

A new lesson plan

The innovative solution involved leveraging existing Internet service in the area with 10 wireless access points set up around the district's roughly 140 square miles. The locations hosted both a 4G LTE device and Secure WiFi device that provided WiFi service within a set radius. Students could drive up to the sites, upload completed assignments, download new assignments and communicate with their teachers, then go home to work on the lessons.

In an impressive feat of community effort, school officials worked with supervisors from Somerset, Lincoln and Jefferson townships to identify host businesses near dead zones in the district's rural regions. Once set up, the sites used a combined data cap so usage was strictly educational. Students log on using their school credentials, allowing the district's security and other Internet safety protocols to continue to protect users.

As part of the virtual program, each Somerset student was given an iPad for either remote learning or at the school building. Grant money helped the district buy the extra 1,000 iPads that were needed to bolster the supply.

A passing grade

By all accounts, the project has been successful so far, with students accessing their lessons easily as of early September. Maxwell is particularly pleased with the solution, and the effort hasn't gone unnoticed by district officials.

"The Somerset Area School District administrative team is very excited to have created a long-term partnership with Brian Miller and the Windstream Enterprise team he assembled," said Maxwell. "They are a creative, agile and accessible crew of professionals."

The hope for the future is to build on the momentum and create better opportunities for distance learning across the rural district.

"It's our intent to share the knowledge we've gained to our representatives and commissioners in hopes they can achieve countywide broadband access," Maxwell concludes.

"Our district is fully prepared to ensure students have the resources available to continue to receive their educational materials, no matter what curveball may come our way. We hope to work with Brian Miller and the Windstream Enterprise team in the future to continue filling in Internet accessibility gaps in our under-served county."

"The Windstream team created a transformative learning environment that virtually extends our school walls across 156 square miles of the district. They've created a secure, digital environment for our students to gain Internet access if none exists at their home locations."

*Judy Maxwell, Director of
Curriculum & Technology,
Somerset Area School District*

About Windstream Enterprise

Windstream Enterprise collaborates with businesses across the U.S. to drive digital transformation by delivering solutions that solve today's most complex networking and communication challenges.

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