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Education

Lessons learned: K-12 IT after the pandemic

Each year, the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) surveys K-12 IT leaders in the US and provides a holistic view of their educational technology challenges and digital strategies. The questions were a little different this year — and so were the findings.

The pandemic has presented a slew of new issues for IT leaders in K-12 education. With that in mind, CoSN added pandemic-related questions to its 2021 ed tech leadership survey, exploring topics like video streaming and community-building strategies. Compiled from 390 surveys deployed between November 2020 and April 2021, the results were indicative of the massive shifts our industry — and world — experienced.

As many survey respondents pivoted to provide new services for staff and students, such as contact tracing and remote counseling, the way their districts engaged with parents changed and communications increased.

Efforts to expand broadband outside school surged dramatically, but nearly every district surveyed said it struggled with remote support and videoconferencing — issues no doubt exacerbated by slow internet connections. Indeed, slow internet was the top challenge of remote learning, followed by connections too slow for multiple users and inability to access a connection in the first place.

Positive feedback was evident in the survey results as well. For the first time, a majority of districts (61%) achieved the FCC's long-term bandwidth goals for schools (1 Gbps per 1,000 students). Additionally, the focus on digital equity and lack of diversity in educational IT leadership increased to become top of mind for respondents.

In the following brief, we highlight four other key findings from CoSN's 2021 "State of EdTech Leadership" survey report, focusing on points of influence for future K-12 IT infrastructure decisions that will require new considerations post-pandemic.

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Big changes, new challenges

16%

Districts that support more than 7,500 devices have increased by 16%.

53%

The deployment of district-owned hotspots, the most popular strategy for increasing broadband access, has increased by 53%.

95%

95% of districts have changed how they engage with parents during the pandemic, increasing communication frequency and channels.

Sources

1 FBI, "Internet Crime Report," 2020
2 EdTech Strategies/K-12 Cyber Security Resource Center and the K12 Security Information Exchange, "The State of K-12 Cybersecurity: 2020 Year in Review," 2021

Overdone:
Department silos

The top three concerns of IT leaders have long remained the same — budget constraints, lack of access to professional development, and the existence of silos across the district. This year, however, the existence of silos jumped up a spot to #2. IT teams had difficulty remaining flexible and effective in cross-functional work, making unprecedented needs for digital communication with parents especially difficult.

Teachers provided technology tips to parents more often than teaching tips.

Underestimated:
Cybersecurity risks

The FBI reported a 100% increase in phishing complaints in 2020,[1] and cyberincidents have resulted in school closures, millions of stolen taxpayer dollars, and student breaches directly linked to identity theft and credit fraud.[2] Still, most survey respondents (84%) didn't rate any cybersecurity threats as high risk, and most districts (59%) don't have a cybersecurity plan — which CoSN flags as deeply alarming but easy to fix.

Wanted:
A device refresh

With the increased number of devices a district is now required to maintain, as well as non-stop demands for more bandwidth, IT leaders want devices that support fast and robust Wi-Fi. Nearly all districts (94%) struggled with videoconferencing during the pandemic, and bandwidth was the leading cause of trouble. Wi-Fi 6 outranks 5G nearly 4 to 1 as an "important or very important" priority.

Needed:
Additional IT support

Most IT departments (61%) were not prepared to provide remote technical support to students and families, and the added duties put enormous strain on their teams. Moreover, three out of four (77%) districts do not have a full-time employee dedicated to network security, putting them at increased risk of attack.

"What we were not prepared for were the non-stop help desk calls for the entire time we were shut down."

CoSN survey respondent

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