

Case Study



The Lafayette Parish School System Bridges the Digital Divide During a Global Pandemic with LUS Fiber

THE CHALLENGE

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in the United States, many questions arose asking how we can continue essential businesses and services safely and efficiently. How can small businesses stay afloat? How can we safely work, shop, and play? One big question that needed to be solved quickly: How can kids still learn in this environment?

Virtual schooling options became popular throughout 2020 as a safe way for children to connect to teachers and lessons during the pandemic. But even this solution brought a new challenge with it: how can we connect underserved students who don't have reliable internet access to this new virtual paradigm? In the Lafayette Parish School System alone, the school board estimated about 10,000 did not have adequate internet access to attend online schooling. This digital divide would keep roughly a third of students in the school system from being able to access school during this time—unless something changed, and fast.

Love Our Schools, a philanthropic organization whose mission is to work to improve the Lafayette Parish School System, sought help from telecom providers to connect these students. After discussions with providers large and small, local and national, Love Our Schools decided to bring LUS Fiber on board—and the Link & Learn program was born.

THE SOLUTION

Love Our Schools met with a number of large national telecom providers, but with their focus on the profitability of the venture, those providers proved not to be ideal for the project and the organization sought additional support. Additionally, the need to develop a filtered service (so the devices could access only school-necessary information via the connection) that was a necessity for the school system to be able to use its funding required greater flexibility than they were able to give. Love Our Schools was on the lookout for a partner that was focused on the students and community first and foremost. Unsurprisingly, it found that in a local provider—though there was a bit of surprise when they found out that the service they would receive would be just as robust as the big names could provide, often more so, thanks to end-to-end fiber connections.

LUS Fiber stepped in and quickly connected many of the students without access to the internet. Based in Lafayette, LUS Fiber knew the area and the unique challenges associated with it—and they were happy to put the community needs first, prioritizing connecting students, digital equity, and affordability.

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In order to get students connected fast, the local provider waived their install fee and deployed a 5G network at their own expense, only charging for the service to the school system—at a discount. The network utilized existing towers linked with LUS’s fiber network to make the closed network, which have the flexibility to be utilized in the future in new ways, if necessary—such as a private school board network that will allow students to connect to the school system while still at home. All the Lafayette Parish School System had to do to get students online was provide the households a home router that was already configured to connect to this network and link to the students’ Chromebooks—LUS Fiber provided the free wireless router, and the school system covered the devices.

LUS Fiber is Lafayette’s community-owned telecommunications system, providing video, Internet and phone service to residents and businesses over the city’s only 100% fiber optic network. LUS Fiber is the first municipal Fiber-To-The-Home (FTTH) system serving an entire community in Louisiana.

RESULTS

LUS Fiber is dedicated to community broadband, with an equal emphasis on both of those words. By putting community before profits, LUS Fiber was able to set up a robust system that served the community and thousands of its students quickly and effectively. It is a reliable, fast fiber network that can handle the video calls and streaming requirements that remote schooling necessitates—and it was provided to the

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— Irma D. Trosclair, Superintendent

Lafayette Parish School System at an affordable rate. While other school systems around the state and country are spending over \$60,000 per month for mobile hotspots with slow connections, sometimes so unreliable that the students didn’t have enough bandwidth to complete their schoolwork, the Link & Learn system provided by Love Our Schools and LUS Fiber has students in the Lafayette Parish School System set up for success.

“LUS Fiber is an organization that the Lafayette Parish School System is proud to call our partner,” said Irma D. Trosclair, the system’s superintendent. “[They have] worked tirelessly to assist us in addressing the digital divide that has existed in our community for far too long. LUS Fiber has been hugely instrumental in helping our dream of internet connectivity for all become a reality. We are stronger today because of this organization and I know our future is brighter because of it.”

