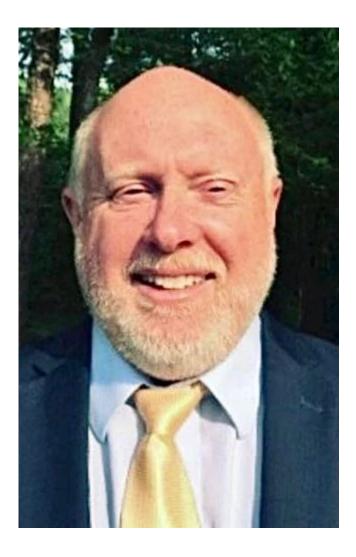https://enquirerjournal.com/enquirer_journal/ucps-distributes-hot-spots-to-students-who-dont-have-internet-at-home/article_5d77f29f-598b-57c6-9868-cf1c9e999f66.html

UCPS distributes hot spots to students who don't have internet at home

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Jay Parker

MONROE — Jay Parker, the Chief Technology Officer for Union County Public Schools (UCPS), and his team have found a solution that allows students access to the internet outside of school.

For students who do not have reliable internet access at home, they can now complete their schoolwork at home. Parker and his team found the solution years before the COVID pandemic, so when schools had to transition to remote learning, UCPS had an easier time than some school districts.

Parker was hired in 2017. He previously worked for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools for 20 years in information technology.

Tasked with finding innovative ways to enhance UCPS' information technology department, Parker and his team partnered with Sprint (prior to the company merging with T-Mobile) in their 1Million Project. The project, started in 2017, was designed to provide hotspot devices to students across the nation so they can have internet access at home. Students are given 10 gigabytes per month. The school district pays for the devices, and there is no cost to students. Each device costs $120.

Parker said it was a "game changer" for the school district.

"Research shows that if a student does not have internet capabilities away from the school campus their chances of staying on track are greatly diminished and to keep that student on track they need to stay connected to explore, learn, complete their homework, and access digital resources," Parker said.

Prior to joining the 1Million Project, about a quarter of public school students in the county either did not have reliable internet access or did not have internet access at all when away from their school campus. Most of those students lived in rural areas. Today, Parker said that number has dropped to about 5% thanks to the program.

In Union County, 654 students from Parkwood and Forest Hills High Schools received devices.

After distributing the hotspot devices, Parker and his team completed an analysis on usage of the devices. They found that it not only benefited the student but also their siblings because up to five people could connect to it.

In the 2018-2019 school year, UCPS contacted the 1Million Project requesting more devices. The Project responded by asking how many devices the school district needed. They needed 6,500 devices for high school and middle school students, Parker explained. Again, the project provided UCPS with more hotspot devices. The next school year, Parker and his team wanted to give devices to students in elementary schools. They were able to get an additional 3,000 devices from Sprint.

When the COVID pandemic forced school districts into remote learning, UCPS was fairly prepared and had an easier time than other districts because they had more than 9,000 devices in their possession.

"...We were able to have 9,000 devices for students so instantly they could switch and continue their learning from home without being on school campus at all. That prepared us for the pandemic. It put us in a place of success for our students. The lack of staying on track was eliminated and now that digital divide in our community was reduced. We continually look for ways to expand upon that project," Parker said.

He later added that UCPS was "instantly enabled to switch to remote learning and to provide those resources away from school campuses."

However, he also said that no one was prepared for full-remote learning. "I would say it was a learning curve for every school district in North Carolina," he said. The risk was determining how much online activity the district's network could handle. Though data showed it was capable of servicing all students and staff, Parker said hesitation remained because data on paper doesn't always translate into reality. Thankfully, this time it did. In fact, Parker said with everyone on the district's network it still had a remaining capacity of 50% that could be used.

Last year, Parker and his team once again reached out for more devices. By this time, Sprint had merged with T-Mobile and they expanded the 1Million Project to Project 10Million to serve more students across the nation. Parker said the project aimed at students in urban areas, but UCPS was the first school district in a suburban-urban area that the project served.

The devices were distributed within the first 30 days of school.

An additional 6,000 devices have been distributed this year, Parker said.

He said the Information Technology department's next focus area was on staff. First year teachers and teachers living in rural areas needed reliable internet access as well. Therefore, the district paid for 500 devices for staff.

Parker believes that UCPS has one of the highest percentages of having hotspot devices for students and staff in the state.

How Parker and his team decided who received a hotspot was based on an anonymous, non-invasive survey asking students and/or their families if they have reliable internet access. If they answered "no" to any of the questions, then they received a hotspot.

As UCPS increases their digital services, Union County Government is working to increase broadband internet access as well by adding black fiber which is a glass high speed fiber in conduit lines with improved utilities like water, sewer and electricity which will be available for growing communities within the county.

Parker is part of a group that is helping to bring broadband internet access to Union County. The group answers to the Board of County Commissioners. The group reviewed information about where the black fibers will be placed and where hotspots are being used. They found areas that either did not have internet access and/or there was a low level of hotspots. Using funding from the state, Union County will be able to address those areas and bring internet capabilities to underserved areas in the county.

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