



Information Technology

By Bill Westrick, IT Director

Education in the Digital World of COVID-19

A year ago this month, we were all just starting to hear about a new coronavirus that seemed to be spreading overseas. We did not know at the time that our teachers and students would need to shift to a distance learning model just a few months later. Now, here we are, approaching the anniversary of our nation-wide school shutdown and change to distance and hybrid learning. From a technology standpoint, operations at Fargo Public Schools (FPS) have changed significantly. Here are just a few highlights and adaptations.

Zoom

Zoom has officially been adopted as our videoconference system of choice, and Zoom for Education licenses were purchased for every teacher and administrator in the school district. Since activating our Zoom for Education account, we have held 62,940 meetings and counting, and some of our Virtual Academy teachers have logged over 350,000 instructional minutes on Zoom already this school year.

1:1 Devices

While the high schools and middle schools were already 1:1, meaning that each student gets their own device, our elementary schools were not. We had to scramble in late March of 2020 to provide devices to elementary students who needed them at home. Over the summer, we purchased enough Chromebook and iPad devices to outfit all of our students from Pre-K to Grade 12 with devices. Chromebooks became the most difficult item of technology to purchase as school districts like ours across the country placed orders to outfit their students, causing delays of six months or more on orders across the United States. Some Chromebooks that we ordered in July are now finally scheduled to arrive sometime in January.

Seesaw

A number of elementary teachers across FPS had been using the free version of Seesaw with their students in the past. They utilized the platform to post lessons and interact with students and their parents. For the 2020-2021 school year, Seesaw licenses were purchased for all grades PreK-5, making Seesaw a preferred platform for elementary communication and collaboration with student and parents. Working with library media specialists, each elementary school did a remarkable job of getting all teachers trained and ready to use Seesaw for the start of the school year. In one elementary school this year, over 47,800 posts have already been made in Seesaw. In that same school, there have been more than 10,600 comments made on students work, 20,928 likes of student work, and over 41,000 visits by family members. That is a lot of interaction!



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CARES Act

The United States Government distributed funds to states to help in the form of CARES Act money. Some of that money was distributed to school districts to help with technology issues that came up as a result of COVID-19 and the need for hybrid and distance learning. To assist teachers, some of our CARES Act money went to:

- Speaker/microphone units that can connect to the teacher's laptop, assisting in the use of Zoom for instruction by providing a quality microphone and speaker for interaction with students.
- An additional computer monitor that a teacher could choose to use at home or in class to make it easier to work on lessons in Zoom while also observing the class video feeds.
- iPads for teachers who did not already have one assigned to them. It has taken longer for iPads to arrive than other technology, and we are just now distributing them to teachers to aid in classroom instruction. This gives them an additional device that can be used as an electronic writing surface, a video camera to easily recording short lessons, and a capture device to turn a paper document into a resource that can be interactively marked up online during class. Teachers will no doubt discover other uses for this instructional tool as time goes on.

I cannot overstate my appreciation for our educators, our administration, and support staff for the amazing work that was performed under uncertain circumstances this past year. From a technology standpoint, I want to specifically highlight our library staff and teacher technology coaches. We all endured about nine months of constant change and had to adjust on the fly. The library media specialists and technology coaches were willing to volunteer each and every time we ask them, and they always do what they can to help to make sure teachers are ready for all the new resources.

I also want to give our technology support team my thanks. In late March of 2020, we had the daunting task of figuring out how to get devices to elementary students in less than two weeks. We also had to build a new support model to help students and teachers who were working and learning from home. Over the summer, we had to plan for a 1:1 deployment of devices to elementary students and figure out how to support a mix of in person and remote instruction. Every step of the way, our technology support team has risen to the challenge. We are fortunate to have such a hard-working and caring team at Fargo Public Schools.

