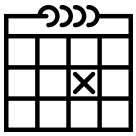
Hāpara

How Prince George's County Public Schools successfully created and implemented a K-12 tech rollout roadmap across their school district

Introduction

Maryland, U.S.
LOCATION



2019
USER SINCE

136,500+
OF LEARNERS

22,000
OF EDUCATORS

Prince George's County, Maryland, is geographically expansive and demographically diverse. It ranges from rural at the southern end, with a core central area near Washington D.C. that is considered suburban but experiences urban problems, up to the northern end of the county which tends to be more suburban. Children and youth from varied socioeconomic backgrounds are served by 208 schools that make up Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS). While Prince George's County is considered one of the wealthiest African American communities in the United States, there are also families who struggle economically.

Evident in the district mindset is a proactive commitment to learner equity and inclusion that is supported through technology. This is paired with a can-do approach to meeting challenges related to K-12 tech rollout, so it honestly serves and supports learning for all.

Technology then and now

Looking at technology integration pre-pandemic, PGCPS already had robust connectivity and a team of 20 technology training professionals in place who supported the district's 11,000 teaching staff. The learner-to-device ratio was approximately 2:1 but moving steadily towards the 1:1 district goal. "As Director of Instructional Technology, I championed becoming 1:1. In that regard, the pandemic has been a catalyst for helping us reach that goal faster than imagined. It has positioned the use of technology for instructional delivery at the forefront for all. Now that we've placed technology in the hands of our students and accessible to our teachers, the effective and intentional use of technology is even more imperative," Lisa Spencer, Ed.D., Director of Technology Training and Support.

A few years back, the district began looking for a solution that would give teachers more visibility and management in the classroom to support students learning on their devices and set up pilot programs for several edtech options. Hāpara Highlights was one, which had been employed by two schools, including Capitol Heights Elementary. PGCPS rolled it out district wide during fall 2020. Closing out the 2020-21 school year, Hāpara was on approximately 132,400 student and staff accounts.

The district's 131,000-plus students started the current 2021-2022 school year on September 8 equipped with their own learning device. While some families elected to continue remote study, the vast majority of students have returned to classrooms and in-person learning. To facilitate a smooth transition into in-class use of technology district-wide, the PGCPS technology team is encouraging teachers who used technology for in-person instruction pre-pandemic to coach teachers who have only used it with their learners in a remote setting. PGCPS not only has met its 1:1 goal, but now it is launching in-class technology integration.

How did an enormous district rapidly deploy technology in less than 18 months? Here's a roadmap of hurdles and how PGCPS successfully overcame them.

Hurdle 1:

Getting learner-to-device ratio 1:1 for 131,000 plus students

When COVID-19 hit, the district raced to its 1:1 goal of supplying a device for each enrolled learner, including individual devices in homes with multiple students. The district quickly deployed Chromebooks and iPads to families through multiple distribution days at each home school. They began with devices already in schools and then purchased more when funding became available.

Hurdle 2:

Reaching learners across the county early in the pandemic

“At the beginning of the pandemic, when pretty much overnight we were told that we were going to be doing virtual teaching, we clung to what we were using in school,” says Bridget McCoy, a second grade teacher at Capitol Heights Elementary School. For McCoy’s group, which already had a 1:1 device ratio, that was a very basic Google Classroom, using Google Docs, Google Forms and Seesaw. Video conferencing was brand new to everyone.

To make sure learners across the county got a lesson each day, teachers were on with them for about 45 minutes a day from March to June 2020, notes McCoy.

“We did our very best to make sure that every student was being reached during that initial shutdown,” says McCoy, who was part of a team that recorded lessons broadcast on the PGCPS cable network for students without devices.

Meanwhile the county worked to resolve the issue of internet access by providing families with hotspots or internet access through vendors like the Comcast Internet Essentials program. In areas where bandwidth didn't favor hotspot usage, some schools were outfitted on the outside with Wi-Fi hotspots so families could go to the school parking lot for access.

Hurdle 3:
Organizing internally for smooth deployment

For Meghen Ehrich, Lead Instructional Technology Specialist, having multiple groups involved at the table from the very beginning was key to deploying technology on such a broad scale. Her team, which directly interfaces with the schools and the teachers, made sure that the Google administrators and engineers who float between the Google side and general support were part of the conversation.

★ **Key takeaway for other large districts**

"Making sure that we all understood the expectations and the impact on our network was critical, not just on network traffic, but even in terms of how it impacted groups that were created and the smaller details," says Ehrich. "I think having everybody involved early on was important, and making sure that everybody understands the different components."

Hurdle 4:

Preparing teachers for remote instruction

At the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, the district had succeeded in becoming 1:1. Pre-K and kindergarten students had an iPad, and first through 12th grade had their own school-supplied Chromebook. The district made a concerted effort to develop a clear, user-friendly infrastructure to support teachers with transitioning into full-on virtual learning.

“When we went into virtual learning, our Technology Training Team (T3) department was, in my eyes, flawless pushing out professional development resources for teachers to use,” says McCoy. “They just made everything as user friendly as it could be during a global pandemic and flipping our classrooms. Because none of this was easy at all. None of this was normal.”

★ **Key takeaway for other large districts**

The department worked to ensure that teachers knew how to use Google Classroom at the most basic level and at the most advanced levels and how to use multiple programs at the same time to run a class. “T3 put up easy-to-navigate websites with pictures of how to organize Google Classroom, tutorials on how to integrate Pear Deck, as well as how to set a good standard of what virtual teaching would look like.’

“Moving into virtual learning was relatively smooth for us because our students were savvy in navigating a device for educational purposes. Plus, we had been piloting Hāpara at least a year prior to the pandemic,” says McCoy.

At Capitol Heights, daily instruction in classrooms like McCoy's mimicked a normal school day and featured live instruction that integrated Google Slides to show lessons and presentations using Pear Deck and Seesaw. Screencastify was also helpful for asynchronous lessons, explains McCoy, who concludes, "And all of this was wrapped up in Hāpara."

For teachers less technically inclined or who were not already at a 1:1 school, Hāpara was still easy-to-use. They could see the thumbnail of what their learners were looking at to make sure they were all on their assignment. Or if teachers saw a few learners on a different website, they could ask them to come back to their assignment.

Hurdle 5:

Rolling out Hāpara for instructional support

Deploying Hapara Highlights for a supportive learning environment

Moving into the school year 2020 to 2021, the county succeeded in becoming fully 1:1.

"During the first round of the pandemic when we went virtual, we used a different product for district access but found that that led to more of a monitoring environment than a supportive environment," said Ehrich. "That wasn't the message we wanted to send to our teachers and our families."

"We didn't really want it to be about monitoring. We didn't want teachers to feel like they had to control what students were doing. Because they couldn't be there with them, we did want them to be able to see what students were doing and give them that connection with our students so that they just continue the instructional process," she adds.

Prince George's County then elected to deploy Hāpara Highlights system-wide to give teachers instructional support along with monitoring capabilities. Adoption increased steadily during the school year, growing from 190 teachers in August 2020 to 4564 in May 2021. Total active days rose from 71 to 13228 during that same time period.

Ashanna Wong Wing, the Hāpara lead for the PGCPS technology training team, shares, "There was a lot of talk amongst the teachers. Word spread by teachers utilizing it and saying to others, 'Did you hear about Hāpara?' When we had the trainings, teachers would express how they were so interested because they heard it from another teacher." Others saw it on the T3 web page or on the staff portal.

★ Key takeaway for other large districts

"We have a group of technology leaders, at least one in every school, who were very vocal in their community about their buy-in, sharing their own resources and discussing the training that they had done," adds Lead Instructional Technology Specialist Kimberly Roberson. "That naturally piqued the curiosity of others."

"Our very large district relies on word of mouth," Roberson adds. "While we have a mighty training team of 20, with 10,000-plus teachers, that word of mouth spread was important."

Roberson says that in a normal school year when you're face to face you want to start off the year knowing what's available to you as a teacher. Yet in late August 2020 when teachers started the school year, they were working from home in the midst of a pandemic, so rolling Hāpara out after instruction had started had its advantages.

”Everything was getting thrown at them at the beginning of the year, not just technology but curriculum shifts,” notes Roberson.” Highlights could have been lost in the multitude of other things on their plates. But by October, their minds were a little bit clearer.”

Or as Ehlrich puts it, “Highlights came as a solution to concerns that had already arisen in their virtual classrooms.”

Teaming with Hāpara to support educators and parents

Hāpara adapted to serve the specific needs of teachers who were being pushed to their limits at this time. First, the company collaborated with the training team to provide materials for self-paced tutorials on its website. Teachers unable to attend the live training appreciated this option. Secondly, Hāpara accommodated time-strapped teachers by extracting material from its comprehensive and in-depth Champion Training which Ehrich believes really helped her team facilitate its use. ”If we had to force teachers to go through the larger piece, it may have felt like too big of a get and been a hindrance to them using it,” she says. “Hāpara meeting us in the middle with the resources was very helpful.”

The Hāpara team also personalized materials for paraprofessionals who use Google Classroom with groups of learners. A video created especially for them on how to sync their Google Classroom made the transition easier for this niche group of educators.

★ Key takeaway for other large districts

“Being in the pandemic, we limited the things that we asked teachers to do. But normally, I think districts outlining clear expectations, supports and guides for how their teachers could or should use Hāpara would be important,” Ehrich recommends.

Hurdle 6:

Deepening the commitment to learners and families

Teaching responsibility according to learners' developmental stage

Fifth grade math and science teacher Tyrone Frierson has been teaching at Capitol Heights since 2004. He and other teachers were looking for something like Hāpara because they wanted children to use technology, yet they wanted to have a way to keep an eye on learners and help them be more responsible for their work.

"When I first started teaching I had a teacher's aide who always helped me out by letting me know when a group of students was not doing the work. Today that's even more important with technology," says Frierson. "Highlights is pretty much like having that aide."

To build trust with his fifth graders, he lets a student know that the message is just between them, but after a certain number of warnings he'll notify parents. For the child watching anime on YouTube instead of working on math, he shows empathy by writing a message like, "I used to be your age, too. And if I had this technology, I would probably be doing the same thing, but I need you to get your work done."

Hāpara's messaging feature also supports McCoy's communication with her younger learners. "Kids who are seven are not good at time management yet. So when I say, "Come back on in 15 minutes," their minds aren't like, "Okay I have until 9:45 to do my work." It was great to be able to message them to say, "Join back in class!" or "If you need help, Ms. McCoy is on Zoom right now."

"I think now, especially in these times, teachers need to show students how to actually use technology to be productive, as compared to something they entertain themselves with all the time," says Frierson.

Opening a healthy channel of communication with parents

★ Key takeaway for other large districts

For any district, clarifying that communication for families is really important because parents can feel like you're spying on them, which is not the intent at all, says Ehrich. "We have such a huge variety of community members and with that, a wide range of familiarity with technology so making sure that there's parent friendly support is really important, above and beyond the technical stuff."

At the same time, Hāpara opens a channel of communication with parents. In Frierson's experience, parents want their children to do the best they can as they move towards middle school, so they have been receptive when he contacts them. "Parents will usually respond, 'Okay, I will talk to him or her. I will deal with it tonight. And thank you for letting me know that my child wasn't focused.'"

The role parents take supporting their childrens' learning can be tricky for teachers to navigate. During school closures, Wong Wing shares that Hāpara really supported families at home. "Instead of parents having to direct and open up sites for their child while they're trying to work from home, with Hāpara the teachers were able to push out links and support the students from a distance."

Wong Wing shares that parents loved the FAQs that Hāpara provided. "We were able to request that the original PDFs were made editable so we could personalize them to our district with our logo and remove information we didn't need. Plus they translated it into the languages PGCPS requires for all communication to families."

Hurdle 7:

Using technology to personalize learning and amplify student voice

Wong Wing is excited to move into this next school year with Hāpara in place to support more teachers, families and even the administrators and other staff within the building. “Now as we’re transitioning back to the classroom, we’re talking to teachers who used Hāpara pre-pandemic to provide tips on how to use it to provide instructional support to the students while being in the same space.”

For example, when Frierson teaches in the classroom or remotely, he often breaks up his 25 learners into three working groups based on level. While assisting learners, he uses Highlights to help him make sure the other two groups stay on task.

Recalling one large class of 38 sixth graders he taught during his 21-year career, long before such technology was available in the classroom, he says, “If I’d had Hāpara in that period, it would have been easier to manage such a large number of students and keep everybody focused.”

Roberson is working with her team to help teachers understand how to amplify students’ voices and to use technology tools to better personalize learning.

She said, “We’re shifting that emergency way that we dealt with a pandemic, ‘We’re just going to give you what you need to connect with your kids,’ to ‘Now let’s really take all the things that you learned during that connection time and make it a more effective instructional environment that integrates technology.’”

To learn more about how Hāpara can help your school district power awesome learning, schedule a session with a Hāpara team member.

Visit hapara.com to get started.

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