INTEROPERABILITY CASE STUDY

Metropolitan School District of Wayne Township

Metro Status: urban

Number of Schools: 20

Number of Students: 16,500

IT FTEs: 22

Interoperability Level: 3-4

It was 1999. Dial-up internet connections were commonplace. Facebook and Twitter were just a dream. The iPhone was eight years away from birth.

But the Metropolitan School District of Wayne Township, adjacent to Indianapolis, had already gotten on the technology train by then and hasn't gotten off. Because of that foresight, Wayne has become an engine of technological transformation pulling other school districts forward into a brave new world of technology interoperability, where every device understands the data, turning it into something that can be used, rather than simply stored.

It might be hard to remember how different things were back when things were new, but vision kept MSD Wayne on the right path and now the fruit of that labor is just beginning to reveal itself, said MSD Wayne Chief Technology Officer Pete Just.

MSD Wayne is not only seamlessly sending and receiving data to administrators, teachers, students and parents, it also is providing opportunities for other districts to profit from its foresight, he said.

It helps when your superintendent since 2011 is selected Indiana's superintendent of the year, as MSD Wayne's Dr. Jeff Butts was in September.

"He brought a motto to the district, 'We are Wayne,'" Just said. "The idea behind that is we all have to work together to be able to be effective. As we're working together, we can achieve a lot more if we limit what we do to the things that are going to be most effective to meet our goals."

That sense of being part of something even larger than serving a big, challenging school district is what makes Just, the board chairman of the Consortium of School Networks, want to keep going.

"One of the cool things about interoperability is that everyone is working together in the same direction," Just said. "There's rules about how to do that, but we're a team and we're not dependent on a vendor to find a solution… or find the problems to be solved."

It's a story of achievement and excitement for an even brighter future. As Just will tell anyone, it all wasn't all that simple.

"Honestly we were naïve at the beginning," he said. District officials, he said, thought "It's like Legos. You just get that piece and plug it in and away you go."

When MSD Wayne was just learning how to swim in technological waters, Just said the district created its "Lighthouse Project," in which IT put computers in classes, but only if the teachers and schools were ready for them. The ones that weren't ready were temporarily passed over.

"The ones that were ready, we put a projector in every classroom," Just said. "This started in '99-2000, so that was pretty radical back then."

Each teacher had a computer at a station, and students had five or so computers to work with in the classroom, he said.

But MSD Wayne has its challenges. It is an urban district that instructs 16,500 students a year in a state not known for its free spending. Nearly 80 percent of the student body qualifies for a free or reduced-price lunch, Just said.

When Wayne went all-in for technology, it took on a heavy load of debt, Just said. Then Indiana legislators put caps on tax increases, which hurt

districts with debt, he said. And under the state's "complexity index," a funding formula that's supposed to help traditionally disadvantaged districts, Wayne got less money from the state over the last decade – even though student performance improved, Just said.

So every year, district officials wrestle with budget priorities, and 2019 is no exception, as taxpayers get to decide in a referendum if they agree to pay more to keep the district moving forward.

Budget issues, however, did not keep MSD Wayne from adopting new technology when it could, Just said. The district started using a learning management system in the 1990s, he said, and now offers classes in subjects such as Chinese and psychology to smaller districts that could not offer those subjects. MSD Wayne's IT team also now provides services to its one traditional high school, a small university high school and an online high school, he said.

"The LMS is what allows us to offer college level courses to our students as well as virtual options that students around the state participate in if they're not finding the traditional environment to be effective for them," Just said.

The payoff? The district and their LMS won an IMS Global award for "Using LMS Interoperability to Power and Drive Student-Centered Learning."

It took a lot of professional development to get the staff up to the point where they could first understand, and then use, technology to improve the students' learning opportunities, Just said. New teachers are required to take 30 hours of professional development in their first two years at MSD Wayne, he said.

Just says the IT team, now up to nine technology application specialists and 13 tech assistants, is in "a very wonderful place" with its curriculum team, working closely to find what works best for academics and how IT can make it happen.

Parents get help, too with easy access to their children's information and real-time reporting on the location of their school bus.

In school life, being technologically advanced means students can find in the digital library everything they need whenever they need it, he said. "They don't need to go to Google and try to find a way to validate what they're reading. They've got curricular digital content from a whole host of providers in the LMS."

"That's the benefit on the digital content side. All that information is right there at their fingertips – the teacher putting together a lesson plan or the student doing research," Just said. "So it all kind of works in the same way by providing simple ways to get to where you want to be and that's what I think this does."

The district also has a strong relationship with the Ed-Fi Alliance, he said, and MSD Wayne also received a grant from the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation to boost its operational data store. MSD Wayne now has assessment data in its ODS and can bring disparate types of data together to provide more meaningful resources for administrators and teachers, Just said.

And yet Just says the district still has a way to go to move forward on the Interoperability Maturity Model. "In a lot of ways, we're not fully rolled out yet," he said, placing the district at level two or three on the model.

"It's not much yet, but it is pretty exciting that we got assessment data going into our ODS," he admitted.

As MSD Wayne developed its systems, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation came back with another grant to help the district flow student information system data into the ODS. MSD Wayne got a project director and an Indiana University researcher to train administrators and, eventually, teachers to make sure technical and academic objectives are being met.

"It's pretty exciting, because what we are learning we can share with other districts, and some of them can jump ahead of us since they're smaller and leaner," Just said.

Just says MSD Wayne got moving early on by listening to its staff. The district did a needs analysis of what teachers thought students would want in a mobile device and targeted devices with a long battery life, big screens and keyboards. They found what they were looking for with Google Chromebooks – now up to 12,500 devices for most students and touch-enabled devices for first- and second-graders, who share them.

"Has the technology made a difference? Yes."

Just says it's not yet time to be able to assess that for interoperability, but one thing he knows is that MSD Wayne recently has raised its graduation levels from the 65 percent range to the 90 percent-plus area.

"Part of that is the result of some of the work we've done… and virtual learning things we've done," he said. "We're really close."

Just says he needs another year, sometime in 2020, when he can provide testimonial evidence of the impact of interoperability on the district. When MSD Wayne sees the graduation needle move from the 90 percent range to 93 percent or 95 percent, he said that's when he'll know.

The hope, he says, is "We're going to see more students graduating. We're going to see more students doing better in class, we're going to see fewer students dropping out. These are the things I think we can accomplish with the interoperability puzzle."

Just is excited that work is on the cusp of paying real dividends.

"The promise," Just said, "is starting to become a reality."