FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Network Nebraska provides pandemic assistance

JANUARY 31, 2022 (LINCOLN, NEB.) — In mid-March 2020, over 350,000 Nebraska K-12 students and their teachers were sent home to begin remote learning during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This sudden and historic transition sent school districts scrambling to provide computing devices and digital content. Meanwhile, some families were unserved or underserved with home internet, and parents found themselves juggling their work lives with part-time tutoring responsibilities.

Network Nebraska operated in the background throughout the pandemic, keeping schools connected to the internet, and assisting the Nebraska Department of Education and the Educational Service Units in their pandemic response.

Network Nebraska provides internet, security, and other services to 99.6% of Nebraska's public school districts and all of the state's educational service units, community colleges, tribal colleges, state colleges, the University of Nebraska, as well as a number of private schools and colleges, public libraries, and municipalities. During the pandemic, Network Nebraska was there to help educators adjust.

Almost overnight, the number of Zoom videoconferencing licenses for schools and colleges increased from around 16,000 to 35,000. One of Network Nebraska's biggest contributions was to help schools obtain these licenses at an affordable price.

Scott Jones, Distance Learning Director at ESU 15 and 16, played a major role in wrangling the new Zoom licenses that helped maintain teacher-student contact during remote learning.

 "Pretty much overnight, schools that didn't have Zoom set up needed them yesterday," Jones said. Without Network Nebraska's help, "there's no way they would have been able to get up and running in the turnaround time we did."

Network Nebraska secured Zoom licenses for schools faster and at a significantly lower cost than schools otherwise would have been able to get them.

"Network Nebraska's firm foothold with Zoom allowed Nebraska schools to be ramped up and ready for the COVID transition overnight," Jones said.

Over 100,000 new student computing devices were ordered and delivered across the state over several months. Over 230,000 student data points were collected indicating households that were served or unserved by internet providers, and whether computing devices were individualized or shared. Some school districts took it upon themselves to provide emergency internet using hotspots and fixed wireless service.

At ESU 10 in Kearney, Technology Director Ron Cone worked on digital equity maps that cross-referenced student households in need of more internet with internet provider companies that were nearby.

Cone said Network Nebraska is a "backbone" for schools across the state.

"It's a resilient, reliable network," he said. "It has been there for a number of years and continues to grow."

At the start of the pandemic, Bancroft Rosalie Public Schools Superintendent Jon Cerny worked with four other school districts and the Nebraska Indian Community College to establish an educational wireless network in Thurston and Knox Counties to serve over 750 students previously unserved or underserved with internet.

"We sped it through and got things operating by the start of the school year," Cerny said. "I would say it was really successful."

Network Nebraska helped to plan and organize the effort along with giving advice and encouragement throughout the process.

Nebraska Chief Information Officer Ed Toner and University of Nebraska System Vice President for I.T. and CIO Bret Blackman are the executive sponsors of Network Nebraska, which serves over 450,000 students and staff every day across the state.

Resources:
networknebraska.ne.gov

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