

Piedmont High School
Piedmont, AL
Piedmont City Schools



How One School Closed the Digital Divide and Brought Broadband to Town

Matt Akin, Superintendent, Piedmont City Schools: In the last several years, the term in education has been “anywhere, anytime” learning, and as we started looking at innovating our curriculum on the high school level, we quickly realized that “anytime, anywhere” learning is a myth, especially for low-income kids who don’t have devices.

Step One: One-to-One Laptops

John Aldred, Editor, *Piedmont Journal*: The start of it really was the one-on-one computers, and allowing students from grades four through twelve to have their own computer to take home.

Sandra McWhorter, Student: It puts everyone on the same playing field, you know, as far as everyone gets a MacBook. They get the same model, you have the same opportunities, you’re all on Blackboard. You know, it doesn’t matter, it’s not an elite view, it doesn’t matter where you come from, you know, or what your home life is, you have the same computer.

Rena Seals, Director of Technology: In May of 2009, we had been experimenting with MacBooks in a small way, just for a few months, and we began to ask ourselves, “what could we do differently with technology?”

Finding a Model

Jerry Snow, PHS Principal: We started, you know, we got a MacBook cart. And it was checked out every day. So we wrote a grant with the state department, and we were able to buy three

more carts with it. So, for my school, when you've got about 325, 350 kids, you know, we've got four carts here. We're halfway there for one-to-one. So we started talked about it, we talked to the administration about it, superintendent, talked about ideas he liked about it. And we actually talked to Apple, and asked, "Who's doing a one-to-one? Who's doing a great job that we can, you know, kind of mimic. So they gave us a couple names, and the superintendent contacted one of their superintendents, our technology person contacted their technology person, and within a week, we flew up, and spent the day with them. We were just amazed at what they were doing.

Rena Seals: And on the way back, on the airplane, is when our high school teacher said, "You know, Mr. Akin, if every student had their own MacBook, we could do everything they're doing. And more. That started his gears rolling. Our initiative grew even more. We went from a high school only pilot to a four—grades four through twelve, full-blown, one-to-one initiative.

Matt Akin: Probably the best thing for me is seeing those kids that were getting lost in the shuffle and how bright they really are when you give them a different way to express what they know.

Marley Harper, PHS student: I've spent my whole life without the computer, but now that I've had it for a few years, I don't know what I'd do without it, you know?

Brian Young: When you look three years on in our laptop initiative, and what our teachers have been able to accomplish with our students, it's really amazing. The fact that every kid at Piedmont has at least one online class every year.

Rachel Smith, Biology Teacher: To know how to collaborate to in that setting is important. So I definitely think that we're preparing them for college and career readiness,

Expanding Broadband Citywide

Brian Young, Former Mayor: We as a city saw this as an opportunity to join with our school system, to help our students in this area, some of low economic means who could not afford the computer systems, for the home time.

Matt Akin: So we applied for a grant through e-rate, we called it *Learning on the Go*. And they chose 20 districts across the country, and we were one of those 20, and as part of that grant we hired a vendor to build a network over the city.

Brian Young: This is really brought on the ability of our students now to do online learning at home, and their parents can take GED courses, again, you know, at home.

Brother Michael Ingram, Parent/ School Board Member: As he began to unfold his vision for the one to one initiative, we all realized that bridging the Digital Divide was the right thing to do for our community, for our students, and we have all, in the last three years, been able to watch the process grow, and to see how it has in fact benefitted every student in our community.