The Easiest Way to Ensure Digital Equity

MCDOWELL COUNTY SCHOOLS
MCDOWELL COUNTY, WEST VIRGINIA

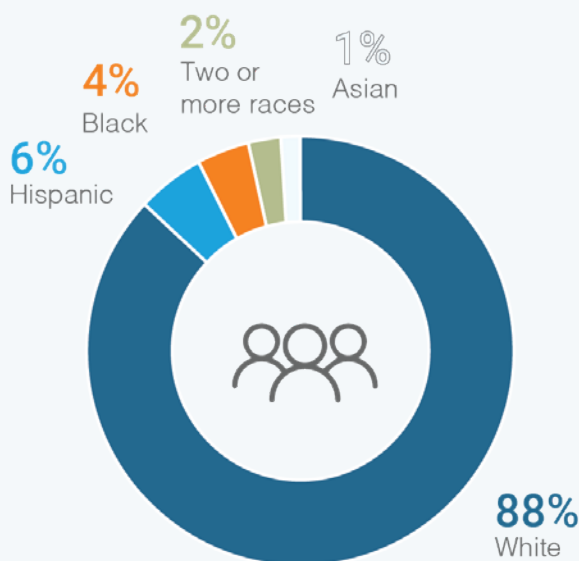**K-12** | **2,600** students | **6** elem schools | **3** middle schools | **2** high schools | **1** virtual school

DEMAND FOR DIGITAL SKILLS

Joey Norris, Coordinator of Technology Integration for McDowell County Schools (MCS), grew up in rural West Virginia and attended the K-12 district. The community thrived on coal mining then, but today, more than a quarter of the county's 20,000 residents live in poverty. To ensure prosperity for the people of West Virginia, the state is striving to equip students with future-ready digital skills to succeed in technology-based businesses that are moving into the state, like Amazon.

2% Two or more races
1% Asian
4% Black
6% Hispanic
88% White

"You can't begin to quantify the way technology has changed the world, and it's not going to stop," says Norris. "It's the world our students are going to live in – they have to have technology skills to succeed."

Following a career as a mathematics teacher in general education and gifted/talented classrooms, Norris returned to his hometown a decade ago. Now he oversees technology instruction, which includes finding a curriculum to support digital literacy skills – a need fueled by the move to online state testing, and demand to equip students with online safety and digital citizenship skills. For several years, MCS had no such program.

"Even those educators that consider themselves tech-savvy are often intimidated by the notion of teaching computer skills. Without a structured program such as Learning.com, the students receive little to no digital education," he says.

Norris discovered Learning.com's EasyTech K-12 digital literacy curriculum, and offered to pilot the program as part of the state's Mountain State Digital Literacy Project, which aims to ensure digital equity for West Virginians.

> **I would recommend Learning.com to anyone, especially smaller districts like ours.**
>
> — *Joey Norris,*
> *Coordinator of Technology Integration*

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EXCEL IN A DIGITAL WORLD

'IT JUST CLICKED'

The timing of the initial implementation was tough: MCS launched EasyTech in the 2020-21 school year, the middle of the pandemic. The district worked with Learning.com's team to develop a customized curriculum that front-loads the digital citizenship and online safety lessons required to comply with the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA). But amid the challenging atmosphere, Norris and MCS educators found the program easy to implement.

"It fell into place so quickly," Norris says. "For the students and the teachers, it just clicked."

That was key for Norris, who – like peers at other small districts – wears many hats in his job.

"Learning.com is a program you can put out there and it more or less takes care of itself," Norris says. "That's what I needed, because I don't have time or personnel to constantly micromanage."

Plus, the program gave teachers – regardless of their level of comfort with technology – a powerful tool to teach digital literacy and provide digital equity for all students.

"Students have developed better keyboarding skills and computer literacy skills so there is not a lot of running between students to show them how to use their Chrome devices," said Austin Thompson, Academic Enrichment Educator at Bradshaw Elementary, who works with students across grade levels.

"I feel it is important to incorporate digital literacy in the curriculum due to the evolving online experiences children are exposed to," he adds.

SCHOOL, COLLEGE & CAREER SUCCESS

Currently, all MCS K-8 students rely on EasyTech to aid in their CIPA compliance, as well as to develop keyboarding fluency and computer science skills necessary for school, college and career readiness.

"My favorite part of the program is how it's easy for the kids to use with a gaming type of platform. It engages the students while also still helping to enhance skills," said Stephanie Jeffrey, 3rd grade teacher at Kimball Elementary.

In the long run, enhanced digital skills will give MCS students the strong foundation they need to succeed in the jobs of the future, which increasingly require technology skills. Norris thinks it's helping them in the near-term, as well: "There's no direct way to measure this, but I think Learning.com is helping with test scores," he says.

> " I enjoyed working with a consultant from Learning.com to mold new frameworks that allowed me to customize my material for different classes or students."
>
> — Austin Thompson, Academic Enrichment Educator

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