

## Forming Collaborative and Connected Communities Within Illinois



Illinois public school districts are banding together to champion for statewide equitable broadband and wireless access. Currently, some of the state's rural schools are underserved in terms of connectivity and technology personnel, creating disparity among Illinois students.

To resolve this issue, educational leaders are bringing in partners like EducationSuperHighway to help analyze ways to provide more access to those school districts.

Additionally, the state's technology directors are forming statewide collaborative groups and hosting professional development conferences to share their knowledge and

expertise with their peers. They are also introducing service providers to the state's underserved school districts to help deliver robust connectivity to their classrooms.



**Most school districts in Illinois have Wi-Fi solutions, but the quality of the Wi-Fi varies greatly. Quality Wi-Fi means you can have 30 students simultaneously connected to devices in one classroom and everybody has coverage. Many school systems lack the WiFi coverage and density to facilitate those types of digital learning environments.”**

— Jim Peterson, Chief Technology Officer, Bloomington Public Schools District 87

The school districts' grassroots efforts are paying off, with successful cooperatives like the IlliniCloud being formed to support the state's education technology needs. The IlliniCloud is a member-driven educational cooperative of school districts that provide schools in multiple states with the means to operate smoothly, efficiently, and safely for the benefit of teachers and students.

“Illinois districts collaborate on how to provide the best educational opportunities for their students,” says Peterson. “For example, the IlliniCloud cultivates collaboration and brokers relationships between these existing trusted networks. We hold a unique responsibility to provide equity within the services we provide to students, staff, and the communities in which we reside. Sharing knowledge and expertise within cooperatives of districts is important to address these local issues in meaningful ways, thus we continuously encourage districts, regional and state operators, and the like to work with IlliniCloud and other collaborative organizations to assist them in serving these unique local demands.”

Wi-Fi and other technology-based issues are common threads of concern across all geographies and demographics. The IlliniCloud was formed to address these technical, teaching and learning, and operational challenges that confront K–12 school districts.

The organization is accomplishing this through collaboration, solving problems at scale, and continually building relationships with similar organizations, regional operators, and vendors to provide sustainable services for others in need.

Below are some of the steps the IlliniCloud is implementing to meet their goals:

- **Extending expertise within the community**
- **Providing meaningful services through public and private partnerships that promote equity**
- **Protecting student data and privacy**
- **Implementing professional development that matches unique district challenges**

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Peterson sees Wi-Fi in the cloud as the next step for creating cost savings while delivering a high level of service for districts. “I think cloud-based Wi-Fi will help bridge the connectivity gap that currently exists among our states’ schools and will provide all students with equitable access to quality Wi-Fi,” says Peterson.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Peterson shared the following approaches he and other Illinois educational technology leaders are implementing to support the widespread integration of quality internal broadband connections:

- **Sharing and collaborating with peers**
- **Focusing on sustainable infrastructure for anytime/anywhere access**
- **Assisting local communities in leveraging relationships and partnerships to solve broadband, internal connections, and home access gaps**

