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RELEASE**
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City, philanthropic partners announce network pilot to connect Marion County students with high-speed internet in an era of eLearning

With initial success, Marion County Dedicated Network Pilot could be scaled to serve public school students countywide as soon as early 2022

INDIANAPOLIS – COVID-19 has forced the closure of Indianapolis schools until early January, but significant numbers of families struggle to access remote instruction because they lack high-speed internet at home.

To help bridge this connectivity gap and build toward a comprehensive solution, the City of Indianapolis is helping support the launch of a \$1.7 million network pilot to connect students at six public schools with high-speed internet to enable eLearning. If proven successful in the pilot stage, the Marion County Dedicated Network Pilot could be scaled up to serve public school students countywide as soon as early 2022.

The City is funding the pilot with \$730,000 in federal CARES Act funding, which is dedicated to offsetting the impacts of the pandemic. The Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation contributed \$500,000, and Lilly Endowment Inc. contributed \$330,000, with the remaining \$100,000 coming from the Indiana 5G Zone. Those philanthropic contributions were made to the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership Foundation.

Two nonprofits with extensive experience in managing technology pilot projects, Energy Systems Network and Indiana 5G Zone, will implement the pilot, and SBA Communications will provide the network infrastructure and services. The Marion County Dedicated Network Pilot will launch in February and will run through September. Following this initial phase, partners and funders will decide whether to scale it to full, countywide capacity.

“As COVID-19 forces students to learn remotely, it’s critical that we do all we can to ensure they remain connected to high-quality eLearning,” said Indianapolis Mayor Joe Hogsett. “The Marion County Dedicated Network Pilot marks a significant step by connecting students with high-speed internet and creating the potential for countywide access to support eLearning.”

A needs assessment in April [found](#) that across Marion County’s public schools, more than 38,000 out of 152,000 students – or 25 percent – lack high-speed internet access at home. The Indianapolis eLearning Fund, a collaboration of civic, philanthropic and corporate partners administered by Mayor Hogsett’s Office of Education Innovation, has been working to address this gap.

Before the 2020-21 school year, the Fund connected families with mobile hotspots as a short-term solution and issued an RFP to create a network enabling connectivity for all Marion County public school students. The pilot will pave the way for countywide eLearning connectivity by testing the technology, allowing partners to develop a sustainable governance model for the network, and keeping infrastructure costs manageable.

“We’re thrilled to partner with the City of Indianapolis and other key funders to implement this pilot of innovative network technology in service of Indianapolis students and families,” said Paul Mitchell, president and CEO of Energy Systems Network. “Indianapolis is on the cutting edge of cities working to better connect students with the technology they need to thrive in an eLearning era, and we’re hopeful this pilot will make broader connectivity possible.”

The network will be piloted at six schools that were chosen based on geographic distribution and ability to optimize signal coverage: George Washington High School in Indianapolis Public Schools; Harrison Hill Elementary School in Lawrence Township; Southport Elementary School and Winchester Village Elementary School in Perry Township; and two public charter schools, Riverside High School and Vision Academy.

Ivy Tech Community College’s Indianapolis campus also will be part of the pilot. These sites will expand the network’s reach for families in the Riverside neighborhood while connecting Ivy Tech students to test a different use of the network. This is important because non-school users will be required to scale countywide.

The network will allow for up to 1,500 WiFi hotspots and 2,000 video call users. SBA is utilizing a technology known as Citizens Broadband Radio Service, or CBRS, which has been used by rural internet service providers to enhance broadband connectivity and is being considered for other education network pilots across the U.S.

Civic leaders see the pilot as part of a larger effort to address education inequities. Lack of high-speed internet access disproportionately impacts students of color, with nearly [31 percent](#) of Black and Latinx students lacking high-speed home internet nationally, compared with 21 percent of white students. A newly formed initiative – the Business Equity for Indy Committee (BEIC) – has launched a task force to help tackle education disparities based on race, and the network pilot offers an example of how to do that.

“The Marion County Dedicated Network Pilot will be an important step in addressing a key gap in educational equity: a lack of high-speed internet access that is particularly acute for students of color,” said Claire Fiddian-Green, president and CEO of the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation who also co-chairs the BEIC’s Learning and Talent Opportunities Task Force. “We must ensure that all students – especially those who have historically lacked access to the same educational opportunities as students from higher income households – can advance academically even as learning takes place remotely.”

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About Indiana 5G Zone

[Indiana 5G Zone](#) aims to help government, industry and academia better understand the opportunities presented by 5G and advanced telecommunications networks. The mission of the Indiana 5G Zone is to be a thought leader in forming 5G, assist and deliver technology breakthroughs with 5G examples, deliver innovation through technology transfer and cooperation, and serve as a one-stop resource for the 5G technology topic.

About Energy Systems Network (ESN)

[Energy Systems Network](#), a branded initiative of the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership (CICP), is a non-profit industry consortium of companies and institutions focused on the development of the advanced energy and mobility technology sectors. ESN was founded in 2009 with the explicit mission to accelerate the pace of energy and transportation technology development and commercialization in Indiana and beyond.

About the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation

The [Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation](#) strives to advance the vitality of Indianapolis and the well-being of its people by addressing the city's most significant challenges and opportunities. The Foundation has three focus areas: education, health, and the vitality of Indianapolis. To advance its work, the Foundation implements a three-pronged approach: strategic grantmaking, evidence-based advocacy, and cross-sector collaborations and convenings.