

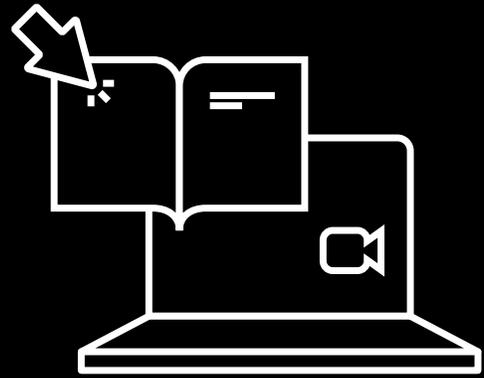


Case study

# How Verizon enabled remote learning for Chief Leschi Schools

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# Chief Leschi Schools



For more than 30 years, Chief Leschi Schools in Washington's Puyallup Valley has been preparing students to walk in two worlds – to become productive members of both the tribal community and the larger society through strong academic learning along with an understanding of the history and culture of the Puyallup Tribe of Indians from which they come.



The largest tribal school in Washington state



Serves over 600 students from three counties

The disruptive nature of the pandemic meant that Chief Leschi Schools needed to take a new approach. A partnership with Verizon helped the school continue to fulfill its mission by supporting its remote learning capabilities and transforming the way teachers, students and parents connect and collaborate.

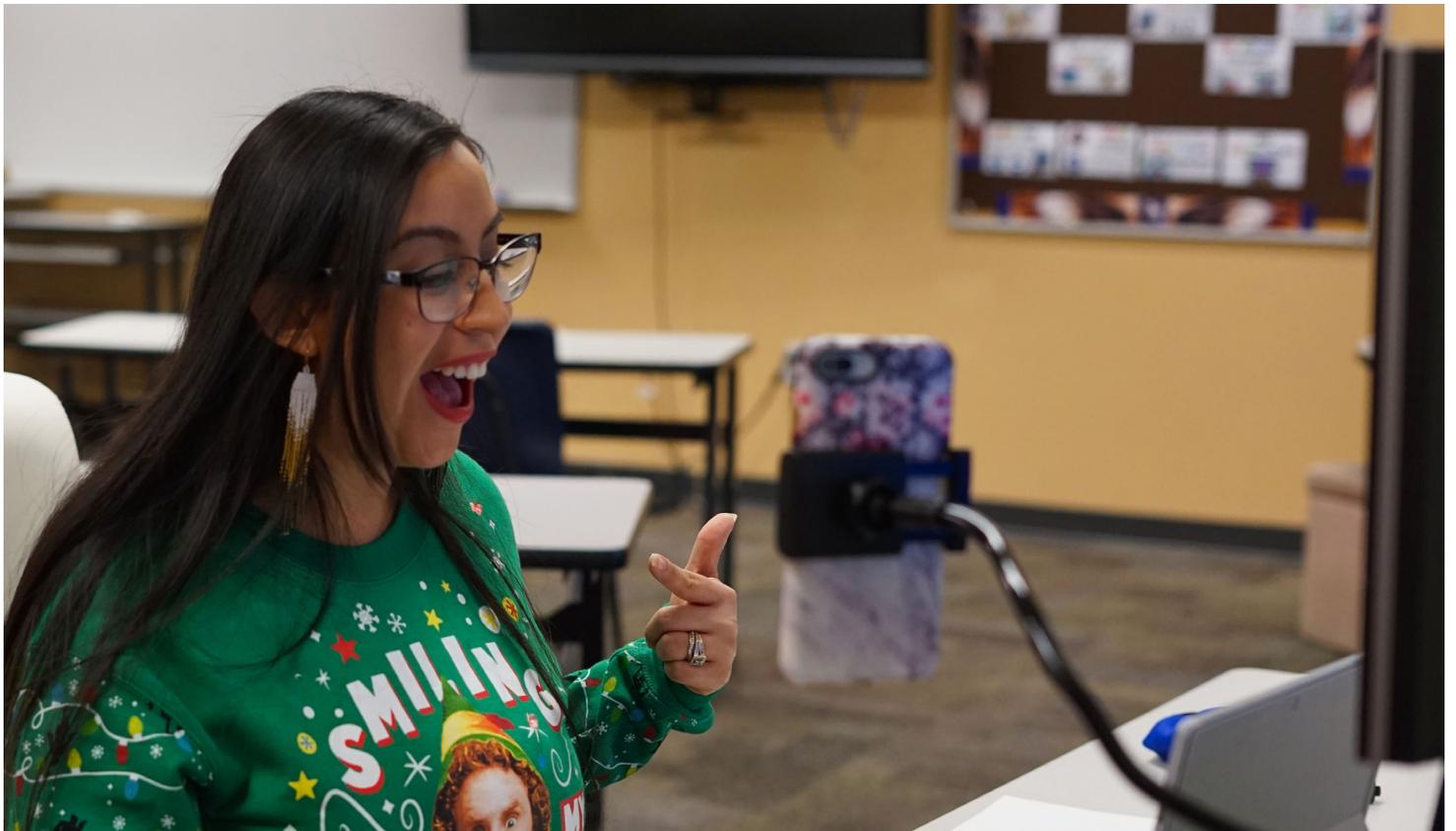
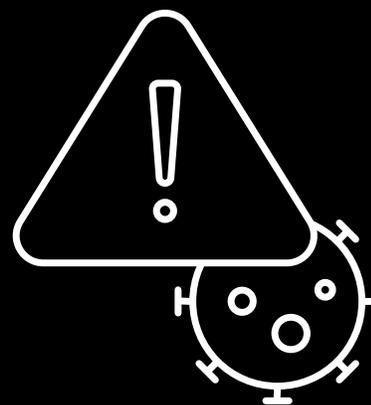


Photo credit: Brittany Piger

# A digital transformation, disrupted



The Chief Leschi campus architecture is suffused with symbols and concepts from the Northwest Coastal and Lakota nations, reflecting the more than 90 different tribes its students and staff represent. Though the campus is just one of almost 200 tribal schools across the US, it is the largest of seven in Washington, spanning 200,000 square feet.

Every aspect of the campus is designed to create a welcoming, nurturing environment for its 630 or so students, who come from three counties. Class sizes are kept small. Common campus areas, such as the gym and the cafeteria, lie closest to the Sacred Circle, which sits at the center and is meant to honor Mother Earth, and classrooms line its perimeter.

Situated some seven miles southeast of Tacoma and Commencement Bay, the elementary and secondary schools are surrounded by the beauty of the natural world. Mount Rainier rises in the distance.

But the campus's remoteness and the often difficult terrain surrounding it can make getting to school a challenge. Hour-long bus rides to and from the schools are common.

Looking to better serve its students, Chief Leschi was already on a path to digital transformation even before the novel coronavirus emerged in early 2020, according to superintendent Marc Brouillet.

"We knew we were missing some opportunities – not time for direct instruction, necessarily, but time for students to do their homework," he said.

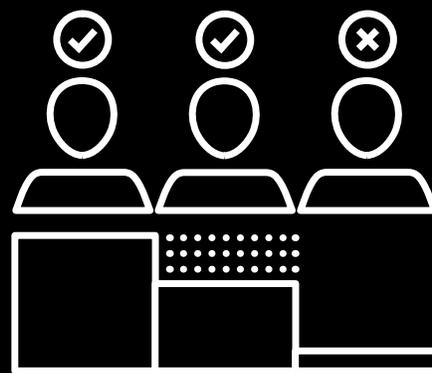
The original vision was to issue mobile devices to students and equip buses with Wi-Fi, letting students take advantage of their commute to build upon what they had learned in the classroom. Given that Chief Leschi Schools serves preschoolers all the way up through high school seniors, that kind of initiative requires careful planning to ensure that technology solutions are rolled out in an efficient, cost-effective way. The leadership team developed a strategy that it would carry out over a three-year period.

Then March came, and the three-year time frame collapsed into three weeks.

**"We knew we were missing some opportunities – not time for direct instruction, necessarily, but time for students to do their homework"**

**Marc Brouillet**  
Superintendent, Chief Leschi Schools

# Roadblocks to equity and access in remote learning



Shutting down classrooms had an immediate and challenging impact on people like Jenny Roy, who was suddenly in charge of home-schooling her grandchildren, all while holding down her day job. In the early days of the pandemic, the immediate barriers were only too obvious.

"I would try to help them, but the way teachers teach the kids now is totally different from how I learned things like algebra," Roy said. "I would show my granddaughter how to get the right answer using my way, and she would say, 'I kind of like your way, but I kind of don't.'"

Back at Chief Leschi Schools, the team wanted to help, but it was in the same limbo as everyone else.

"When school was dismissed on March 17, we were on hold for two months," Brouillet said. "And then the state made the determination that we were not coming back [for that academic year]. We had been doing what quite a lot of districts had been doing – sending out packets of materials to students at home. The problem is that those packets were really just busywork that didn't provide a lot in the way of instruction."

Brouillet said that the school was mindful about not overwhelming parents and their children at first; it began with half-day programs of live instructional time. Elementary school classes ran in the morning and secondary school classes in the afternoon in order not to overtax households with many children competing for Wi-Fi and other resources. Lessons were recorded so that students could access them later as needed. "We were trying to create a system that was helpful for the family without always knowing what their needs were," Brouillet said.

For Jeannine Medvedich, Chief Leschi Schools' chief academic officer, remote learning was not simply about offering education continuity. It was about equity.

"We couldn't roll out a program that every kid couldn't access," she said. "The biggest hurdle for us was to say, what is available to our kids, and even if we got them a device, would they be able to utilize that device when they have a number of other kids in the home?"

Chief Leschi serves many households without access to cable internet, for example, Medvedich said. Wi-Fi is an obvious solution, but the school couldn't find the equipment needed to set up hotspots.

"We were running into roadblocks," Medvedich said. "The equipment we were looking at was back-ordered for months, and realistically it wouldn't have come in until May or June."

Perhaps worse, some of the vendors Chief Leschi Schools had approached were stipulating one-year subscriptions, regardless of how remote learning would need to scale.

**"Remote learning was not simply about offering education continuity. It was about equity."**

**Jeannine Medvedich**  
Chief academic officer, Chief Leschi Schools

# How speed and flexibility helped level the playing field



Until governmental coronavirus relief grants became available, Chief Leschi Schools had to underwrite any remote learning projects on its own. That meant finding a partner that could maximize its resources was essential.

Verizon was already providing cellular service to Chief Leschi Schools, but as the pandemic unfolded, Brouillet said that Verizon reached out to see how it could help support the school's remote learning efforts.

In response, Verizon equipped families who didn't have Wi-Fi with the mobile hotspots they needed. Verizon also provided remote connectivity with 4G LTE on remote learning devices and tools and unlimited data plans to students without home Wi-Fi.

"Verizon gave us flexibility in purchasing the hotspots and then activating them based on our need. That was what really created a level playing field for us," Medvedich said.

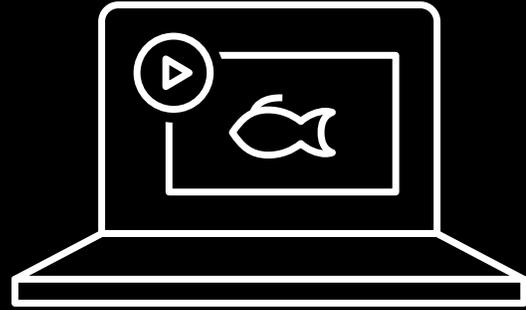
Given that it was already using myriad products and services from Microsoft, Chief Leschi Schools standardized Microsoft Teams as its distance learning video tool. It issued students Microsoft Surface devices, Hewlett-Packard laptops – whatever was available.

"Verizon responded really quickly and gave us a couple of options on what might suit our needs," Brouillet said. "We were almost able to have the hotspots enabled at the same time that devices rolled out. By the middle of May, we were up and running on our devices and with teachers offering online instruction."



Photo credit: Brittany Piger

# Harnessing the benefits of online learning



Since setting up the Verizon hotspots and other technology involved in the project, Chief Leschi Schools has seen 100% of its students take advantage of online learning.



**of Chief Leschi students take advantage of online learning.**

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## The benefits have been manifold:



Students can work on school work while traveling



Allows them to creatively share knowledge



Key for social and emotional health while at home

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## Creative freedom

Chief Leschi only had about a week to get its teachers up to speed on their new tools, but it didn't take long for the teachers to put those tools to the best possible use.

Consider Elsie Mitchell, who teaches science and engineering as part of Chief Leschi Schools' career and technical education department. Normally, part of Mitchell's lessons would involve taking students to the school's hatchery to see how life begins. Without the school's remote learning program, the pandemic would have forced students to miss that kind of opportunity.

"My students and I have been able to connect using the hotspots and continue having class, including a live tour of the hatchery," Mitchell said. "I even took a trip down a river and, through the technology, I had them with me. I've been able to offer some cool experiences that would have been too dangerous for them to do otherwise. It's been nice to have the freedom to continue to go outside the classroom."

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## Access virtually anywhere, anytime

"Before Verizon stepped in, it was common for one child to be kicked off the internet – and out of class – because the technology couldn't keep up", said Medvedich, who has four children of her own. It was the same for Shana Roy, Jenny Roy's daughter, who was managing seven school-age children during the pandemic.

**“Without the school’s remote learning program, the pandemic would have forced students to miss that kind of opportunity.”**

**Elsie Mitchell**

Science and engineering teacher,  
Chief Leschi Schools

“Until we got the hotspots, I had to make sure everyone was off their other devices – their game stations, their tablets – in order to get their laptops working,” Shana Roy said.

While many people sheltered in place as much as possible, there were times when there was no choice but to leave home – and that makes remote learning even harder. One of Shana Roy’s daughters, for instance, was a high school senior, but she was dealing with an injury that required regular doctors’ visits. That meant a 30-minute trip each way, plus plenty of time in waiting rooms. Verizon’s hotspots bridged the distance there, too.

“While we would sit in the lobby or the doctor’s office, she would check in and do her work,” Shana Roy said. “Then she would let her teacher know, ‘Oh, my doctor’s in, I need to cut out for a little bit.’”

Shana Roy has also had to visit her employer’s offices, with no choice but to bring some of her children along. Her kids continued to be productive, though, thanks to the connectivity Verizon provided.

“It’s been much easier for my kids to keep up in school and with their schoolwork,” she said. “It works for my family.”

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## Flexible learning

Shana Roy has enjoyed using Verizon’s connectivity to video chat with her children’s teachers – especially those teaching her younger kids, who might not always remember the due dates and details of their assignments. And her eighth-grade daughter, she said, was able to contact her cousins, who are in the same class, to work on group projects.

Teachers see similar benefits, even if they’re primarily staying connected through email.

“The communication with the students is very good and gives us a record of how many times we’ve reached out to them and how hard each child is working,” Mitchell said.

Digital tools also offer teachers alternatives to how they organize and run classes, Brouillet said. Traditionally, parts of in-person classes were devoted to reading chapters of a book or watching a video. Students might now be able to do some of those things at home or while traveling – and that, he said, frees up time for active discussion.

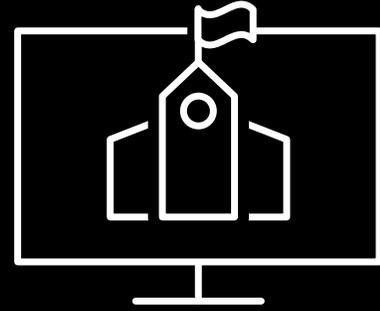
“Even when the pandemic is over, we’ll see some real ways that online learning can be a continued asset to instruction,” Brouillet said. “We want the kids back in person, together, but we still see this as a valuable tool because it can allow kids to be more creative in showing what they know.”

Mitchell also noted that the ability to connect remotely means kids who aren’t feeling well can stay home without missing class. In some cases, kids who can’t attend a field trip could be able to take the journey with their classmates from their homes.

Technology can also leave children feeling less adrift during trying situations, such as pandemics, Medvedich added.

“What I appreciate is that we have connectivity so that kids are getting an opportunity, even if it’s on a screen, to engage and be a little less isolated,” she said. “Being able to provide devices and connectivity is a key in their social and emotional health.”

# Toward a brighter future



Chief Leschi Schools is monitoring its success, according to Medvedich. School leaders are looking at engagement data showing which students are attending and performing well, which students aren't attending or performing well, and which students are in between. The school can then interpret patterns to uncover underlying issues that need to be addressed to better support the learning experience. And it can lean on that data to individualize educational approaches in profound ways. Some students might benefit from a one-on-one session with a teacher, for instance, or a change in the kind of content they're receiving in class.

So far, the transition to a remote learning model has been a resounding success, and it has positioned Chief Leschi Schools as a leader in the educational community; the school was invited by the US Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Education to present its learnings to more than 50 tribal schools from across the country. Among the school's recommendations, Brouillet said: set up a single login that accesses multiple online resources, and develop experiences that focus on students' and parents' needs before teachers' and administrators'.

"We don't want to assume what a parent's life is like," Medvedich said. "Our true north is our kids. How do we make that as accessible as possible, knowing that there are people, like me, who don't have that luxury of being at home with their kids?"

Jenny Roy said that she appreciates being able to check grades and connect with teachers using videoconference tools.

"If we didn't have those hotspots," she said, "we would lose them and have to try and get connected back on again. This is something that's really needed."



Photo credit: Brittany Piger

A silver lining to the COVID-19 pandemic's dark cloud – that Chief Leschi Schools was able to accelerate its digital transformation in partnership with Verizon – has offered hope and excitement about how remote learning will continue to evolve.

"We're providing opportunities to access education in a way that hasn't ever been possible," Medvedich said. "It's a bright future coming out of a really crazy pandemic."

## Learn more

[Verizon's K-12 Education solutions](#)