

Bridging the Indoor, Outdoor Learning Experience With Fiber and VoIP: Windham Woods School

Windham Woods School employs FirstLight Fiber's fiber-based internet and unified communications services to increase reliability and responsiveness for its growing student body. **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** thanks Matt Taffel, assistant head of school and middle/upper school director for Windham Woods School, and Chris Canney, enterprise account executive at FirstLight Fiber, for helping assemble this profile.

By Sean Buckley / *Broadband Communities*

With diverse backgrounds in public school teaching, admissions and private-school fundraising, the founders of Windham Woods School had a simple idea: start a school for students who don't fit into the traditional learning mold.

Now in its second year of operation, the private school in Windham, New Hampshire, offers a hands-on, dynamic educational setting for students with mild to moderate learning challenges in grades 1 through 10 (grades 11 and 12 will be offered in 2022).

"We are here to teach students who are not successful in a general education setting, including students with learning challenges who are used to getting pulled out from their classrooms to have one-on-one reading tutorials," says Matt Taffel, assistant head of school and the middle/upper school director. "We wanted to create an environment in which these students can be included together in a classroom setting."

As they were developing the concept for the school, the founders came across a local property owner with 250 acres and a building that could be used for an outdoor learning

center. She shares a passion for helping students with learning challenges.

"The property owner wanted the property to be utilized in the best way," Taffel says. "She cares so much about students who don't have the same opportunities as others."

Making use of the 250 acres, the school is known for emphasizing outdoor education through hands-on learning. Among other features, it boasts 4 miles of private trails. Classes have a maximum of 10 students, allowing teachers to develop truly custom instruction for each student.

STREAMLINING SERVICES

Given the momentum it has seen with its growing student body, Windham Woods School needed phone and broadband providers that could provide reliable service and respond as needs change, and FirstLight Fiber fit that bill.

Before it made FirstLight its primary provider, Windham Woods School could choose from the cable and telco incumbents – Consolidated Communications and Comcast Business – and a competitor, FirstLight.



Its fiber-based connection means the school can easily make upgrades to services as needed.

“I spent time planning the curriculum before students arrived in 2018 and trying to figure out what we were going to do with our phone and internet systems,” says Taffel. “We had Comcast, Consolidated Communications and FirstLight, but we needed to streamline what we had to optimize it for education.”

Taffel reached out to Chris Canney, enterprise account executive at FirstLight. Canney agreed to travel from FirstLight’s headquarters to meet with school founders in Windham.

“Since Chris first took my call in 2018, he takes the time to research the different options to get me the best service and the best price, knowing that we’re a small operation,” Taffel says.

POISED FOR GROWTH

Since adopting FirstLight service, Windham Woods’ communications needs have continued to grow as the school adds more staff and students. After planning the curriculum in 2018, the school opened its doors to 47 students in grades one through 10 in 2019 with 20 staff. The school continues to grow, and has added 10,000 square feet of space. Over the past year, the student body grew from 47 students to 75 students.

“Because of the growth of our student body, we had to kick off a fundraising campaign last year to double our square footage,” Taffel says. “We installed hospital-grade HVAC and ionization equipment, so we have the healthiest environment possible.”

As it has grown, Windham Woods School has doubled the number of phones and installed another 24-port switch in its building.

“We wanted to have a phone in every learning space,” Taffel says. “With the internet, there’s never been a time when we needed a more reliable service.”

RESPONSIVENESS IS KEY

Because it has a fiber-based connection, Windham Woods can easily make additional upgrades as needed by contacting FirstLight. “Our fiber-based internet service is always reliable, and it is easy to tell if we need to upgrade because it’s a dedicated connection,” Taffel says.

In tandem with getting the best service, it is also important to have a responsive provider. “Besides the fast internet service, the customer service has always been there,” Taffel says. “Chris Canney and Scott Allen at FirstLight have been able to give us the answers that we need.”

PROPERTY OF THE MONTH HIGHLIGHTS ~ Windham Woods School ~

- 100 Mbps symmetrical fiber-based internet access
- VoIP service to support campus phones
- Common area Wi-Fi service
- Video surveillance system



Windham Woods School offers a hands-on, dynamic educational setting for students with mild to moderate learning challenges.

He adds, “As things take a while for installation, it’s always nice to give them a call and say, ‘I know it’s a month out – is there any way to get that port switch equipment installed in a faster way?’ and they are on it.”

Having this network flexibility has come in handy as the school navigates the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced it to develop a remote learning option.

“Like everyone else, we went remote on March 13 and launched a pretty robust remote learning plan,” Taffel says. “We were able to do one-on-one instruction and give personal attention to students despite being remote.”

As part of its effort to get students back to a five-day-per-week program on campus, the school bought tents to continue the outside learning experience.

“We all need to wear masks, but they can be outside and learning,” Taffel says.

VITAL STATISTICS

Property description: Windham Woods School is a private school in Windham, New Hampshire, offering a program for students and families grades 1 to 10 looking for a more hands-on, dynamic educational setting.

Demographics: Students with learning disabilities in grades 1–10, staff and teachers.

Greenfield or retrofit? Retrofit

Style: Two-floor school building

Time to deploy? Deployment took about 60 days without any interruption.

Date services started being delivered: 2019

Special property requirements: The road where the school is located did not have service, so FirstLight Fiber needed to do a custom build that came down the street. It had to price out the project to make sure the payoff would be enough to make the build worth the cost. FirstLight explained the custom build in detail to the school, so there were no surprise charges.

Provider choice: Do additional service providers operate separate broadband networks on the same property? FirstLight is the main provider. Consolidated and Comcast, which Windham Woods used previously, also are available to the school.

SERVICES

FirstLight provides the school with symmetrical 100 Mbps fiber-based dedicated internet access (DIA) service. It also offers VoIP that serves 25 lines in all learning areas, including classrooms and administrative offices.

The school also has access to common-area wireless service as well as a managed edge router with perimeter security and content filtering.

BUSINESS

Which parts of the network do the service provider own, and which parts belong to the property owner? The video surveillance system is owned by the property owner and the fiber network is owned by FirstLight.

Network benefits: Though fiber connectivity is critical for any school, Windham Woods students need interactive technology to help them access the curriculum; the

technology makes the classroom a modern, engaging, exciting place to be. Each student experiences a course unique to his or her needs focused on the principles of engagement, communication and organization (ECO). Designed to help students navigate today's ever-changing and often complex societal norms, technology is a critical tool for ECO.

TECHNOLOGY

Network architecture: FirstLight delivers a dedicated fiber connection to the building.

Methods for running cables between buildings, vertically within buildings, horizontally within buildings: FirstLight provided a standard underground installation into the school building.

Vendors/products

- Polycom (desktop phones)
- Meraki/Cisco (edge routers)

LESSONS LEARNED

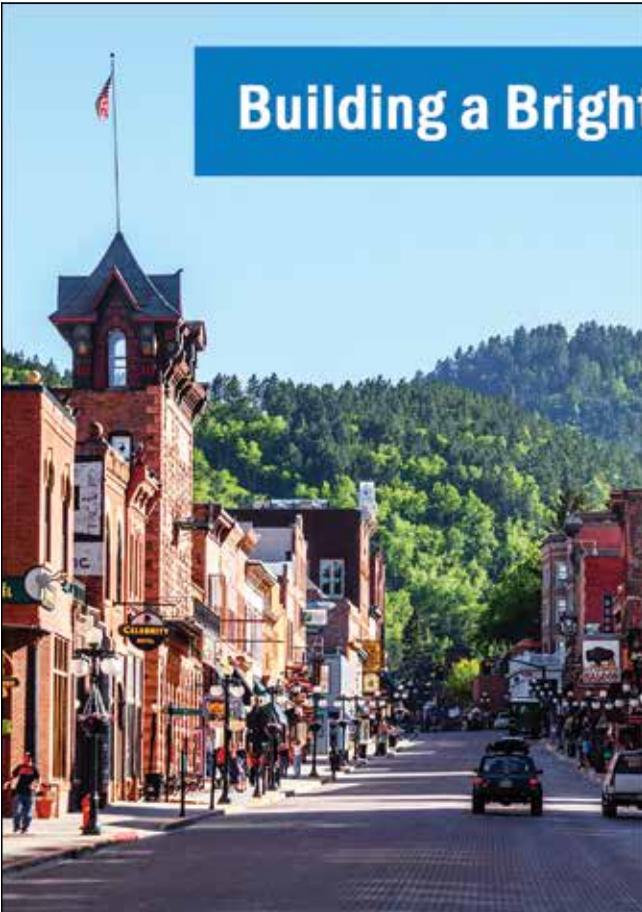
What was the biggest challenge? There were no real challenges. The installation went smoothly.

What was the biggest success? The school provides a lot of options generally to students, whether they learn remotely or outside on campus. Students have many ways of learning, so the school needed a flexible program. FirstLight has been able to provide that and customize a plan that works. If change is needed, FirstLight is responsive and helps right away.

What should other owners consider before beginning a similar deployment? Try to find someone who works at the company who will take the time to get to know you and your needs. Then make sure they ask the right questions to help you determine what you need without pressure. Taffel says that's what FirstLight did for Windham Woods School.

"My folder of telecommunications was huge," says Taffel. "Until I found Chris, no one took the time to get to know me, our school and our mission. Chris drove all the way over here to talk about our needs. He knew it was an in-person visit that would make both of us comfortable going forward." ❖

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