Peninsula School District

*Metro Status: suburban*

*Number of Schools: 7*

*Number of Students: 9,000*

*Device-to-Student Ratio: 1:1 (grades 5-12) approx. 1.5 (grades K-4)*

*IT FTEs: 18*

*Interoperability Level: 2*

With so many high-tech corporate headquarters dominating the Seattle/Tacoma area, it’s reasonable to believe the region to be a technology oasis.

About 45 minutes southwest of Seattle and just to the north and west of Tacoma, lies the aptly named Peninsula School District. It sits on, of course, a peninsula that encompasses the district’s hometown of Gig Harbor, Washington.

It’s in a suburban setting with eight elementary schools (more on that in a minute), four middle schools and three high schools with 1,200 employees – about half of them teachers -- educating a total of 9,000 students.

But while technology leaders loom in the figurative skyline over the school district, next-level technological advances in Peninsula have been slow to come by, says Kris Hagel, chief information officer.

Each student in grades 5-12 has a Chromebook, but these schools have only started giving students the devices a few months ago.

Getting to a true 1:1 student-to-device ratio K-12 will take time, he says. “We don’t have the money to be doing that all at once,” said Hagel, who works with a budget of about $3.5 million.

Even when there will be technology for every student, interoperability to create a purposeful use for that technology would still be off in the future, farther off, he said.
“I spoke at a conference in 2006 about data integration,” Hagel said. “It feels like the same things I was talking about in 2006, we’re still having the same conversations in 2019.”

The cause is a familiar one: money. In Hagel’s 11 years at Peninsula, the district has struggled through “really tough years” — through the Great Recession, losing state funding, and then when the economy rebounded, it struggled to catch up.

Peninsula, he said, was “to the point where we were buying used, refurbished computers to at least keep the things that we had running... We were doing whatever we could to get devices in front of students. And so we tried a lot of different options. All the way back to handing I-Pod touches to kids and to IPads to some degree and Netbooks.”

Fast-forward to 2019. The good news is Hagel can see light in the tunnel for the first time since he joined Peninsula. Voters earlier this year in the district approved a bond issue, the first one in 16 years.

The district’s first order of business, however, is rebuilding its schools. The $198 million bond will fund the renovation of two elementary schools and the construction of two new ones. They are desperately needed as Peninsula now crams elementary students into those eight elementary schools and 66 portable classrooms, and enrollment in the coming kindergarten class is projected to be the largest in 25 years.

“There’s a lot going on,” Hagel said, “so sometimes data interoperability is not at the top of mind.”

Hagel hopes he will be able to pay some networking costs with the capital bond funds, which then would free up the existing budget on other needs.
With a recent vacancy on his 18-member IT team, Hagel took a look at staffing and changed things around, adding a second data integration analyst.

“Being able to increase staff knowing I have to be the person looking out five years or 10 years ... I have to staff for that kind of environment,” he said.

In the state of Washington, he said, school districts can fund their IT operations with a general tax levy, state dollars, a capital bond and a technology levy.

Historically Peninsula has had only the general tax levy and state funding, Hagel said. “And so now we are going to be fortunate to have a little bit of money helping out with one more. We’ll see ... about whether to run a tech levy next year in 2020.”

Peninsula has another hill to climb: It has had a string of superintendents come and go. It is on its third superintendent in three years, and his timeline in the job is not long, Hagel said.

The interim superintendent, Dr. Art Jarvis, is “very supportive” of technology and innovation, Hagel said, but it’s been hard for the district to sustain a longer-term vision.

“Constant change in leadership makes for a real challenge in keeping plans going, and initiatives and strategic goals, because everybody that comes in and everybody that leaves had a different view on where you should be,” he said. “And so that makes it difficult.”

With the figurative fire over elementary school capacity in check, Hagel said, Jarvis is turning the conversation back to the most fundamental question of teaching in a technologically changing world: What does good teaching and learning in the Peninsula School District look like?
“It’s something we are working on really hard at the moment,” Hagel said. “And I think once we have a coherent vision across the organization, I think those conversations will take place, but until everybody’s talking and thinking on the same lines about what good teaching and learning looks like, it’s really hard to have a deeper conversation about what are the things we need to facilitate good teaching and learning -- one of those things being data interoperability and data analysis.”

Hagel also said Peninsula often bumps up against curriculum vendors that resist making their products capable of importing and exporting data to an open standard.

“Some of the challenges we’re running into is vendors that say they support that … but in reality, they haven’t actually written the code to make it work,” he said.

Nevertheless, Hagel continues to fight the good fight. The district is in the process of bringing Ed-Fi’s data store and warehouse online, he said. Peninsula also signed the Project Unicorn pledge, a promise that demonstrates the district’s commitment to provide secure access to student data, educate practitioners and families about student privacy, promote equity, and ensure fiscal responsibility for education technology purchases to improve the educational impact and security of student data.

And, Hagel brought a majority of the 10-member Peninsula cabinet to the CoSN annual meeting in Portland, Oregon. Taking a large contingent of district leaders who are not responsible for technology, he hoped, opened their eyes and ears to the conversations they need to start hearing, he said.

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**Project Unicorn pledge—**

* a promise that demonstrates the district’s commitment to provide secure access to student data, educate practitioners and families about student privacy, promote equity, and ensure fiscal responsibility for education technology purchases to improve the educational impact and security of student data.
Hagel also regularly meets with tech directors from districts around the Puget Sound, including the adjacent Highline Public School District, which is a member of Digital Promise’s League of Innovative Schools.

He remains committed to moving up on CoSN’s interoperability model, saying it needs to be a focus over the next three to five years.

And, he says he’ll do it whether or not the teaching staff is ready for it.

“You hate to have the technology drive the instruction, but sometimes maybe that’s just the way things have to happen,” Hagel said. “You really want the instruction and the curriculum folks and the teaching and learning folks to be begging for the technology or begging for the data to help them make decisions, but sometimes when they’re not there ... you have to come at them first with the technology and show them what’s possible before they can get a vision of what they really, truly want.”