

PROVIDING EXCEPTIONAL CUSTOMER SERVICE

FORT WAYNE

Customer service is part of the DNA of Fort Wayne Community Schools. To do this, Fort Wayne relies on Let's Talk! from K12 *Insight*. Learn why this easy-to-use tool has been a 'game changer' for community engagement across the district.



THE LANDSCAPE

Depending on when you look at enrollment, Fort Wayne Community Schools is either the largest district in Indiana or the second largest behind Indianapolis, serving close to 30,000 students. With more than 70 languages spoken and nearly 70 percent of its students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, Fort Wayne faces obstacles common to many large, urban school systems of its size—but its “can-do” attitude sets it apart.

“We’re blessed with a very diverse city—and the school system is in the heart of every neighborhood,” says Superintendent Dr. Wendy Robinson. “We don’t view ourselves as a typical urban district, and we consider what we have to face as opportunities as opposed to challenges that weigh us down.”

The word “community” in the district’s name is highly appropriate. For such a large school system, Fort Wayne Community Schools actually feels much smaller than it is—and that’s a result of its strong sense of community spirit.

“Even though our students are extremely mobile, a lot of our staff are very stable,” Robinson explains. “Most of the people who work here have been with the district for a long time.”

Robinson herself is a perfect example: Her connection to the district goes back to her experience as a kindergarten student. She has worked for the district as a teacher and administrator for 35 years. In a field marked by turnover, Robinson has been superintendent in Fort Wayne since 2003.



THE CHALLENGE

Fostering such a strong sense of community in a district the size of Fort Wayne isn't easy. It takes a single-minded focus to provide exceptional community engagement and customer service for all stakeholders—something the FWCS Board of School

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Trustees has articulated as one of its three strategic goals (along with academic achievement and fiscal responsibility).

For the district, such a focus is essential in today's climate of school choice and competition.

School districts lose thousands in per-pupil funding every time a parent opts to enroll their child in another institution.

K12 leaders “have to recognize that we do have customers,” Robinson says, just like businesses do. “We're not a monopoly, just because we are the public school system. We have to understand our customers and treat them the way customers want to be treated.”

Fort Wayne thinks of itself as having at least four separate constituencies, Robinson explains: students, staff, parents, and the voting public, who might or might not have children in school. In a district the size of Fort Wayne, listening to all of these

stakeholder groups and including them in decision making can be a challenge.

That's why the district sought a solution to make it easier for district leaders to collect feedback from stakeholders, respond to their concerns in a timely fashion, and track how quickly the district responds. FWCS found that, and more, in Let's Talk!, from K12 *Insight*.



- www.fwcs.k12.in.us
- Fort Wayne, Ind.
- Nearly 30,000 K12 students

GOALS

- Engage the community by providing exceptional customer service.
- Collect feedback from stakeholders and use this to improve decision making.
- Respond to questions and concerns in a timely fashion—while tracking and measuring the response.

APPROACH

Connect with all stakeholder groups—students, staff, parents, and the larger community—with surveys and an always-on listening tool.

PRODUCTS

Let's Talk!

Engage



THE SOLUTION

Let's Talk! is a cloud-based communications solution that gives stakeholders a 24-7 platform for asking questions and providing feedback to school leaders. Community members can submit their questions, comments, or concerns, by phone, email, social media, or the school district's website. Regardless of channel, all of the messages are automatically routed through Let's Talk!'s online system and assigned to the appropriate staff member for a timely response.

Administrators says Let's Talk! helps them engage in meaningful conversations with community members, be it parents, teachers, students or staff. With Let's Talk!, district leaders are able to share information on programs and policy changes and collect feedback from parents and others ahead of critical decisions. Social media monitoring and special Critical Alerts make it possible to identify potential communications crises fast, before they make headlines.

Let's Talk "has been a game changer for us," Robinson says. The technology helped the district become more responsive to community needs—while also helping administrators make better, more informed decisions.

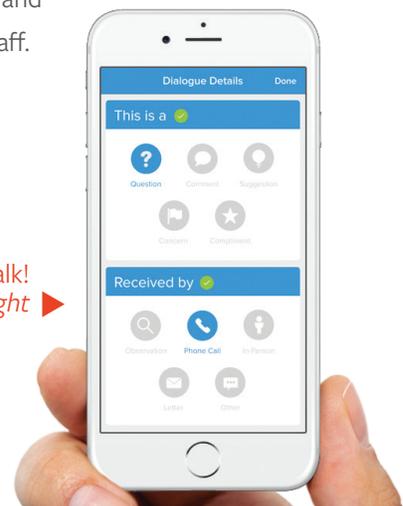
For instance, the district was recently forced to cut \$2.5 million from its transportation budget, which involved changing or cutting nearly 60 bus routes affecting more than 7,000 students at all levels of education. The change had the potential to get very messy, very quickly. Let's Talk! made it possible to include community members in critical deliberations, ensuring that no one felt "cut out of the loop."

"We answered questions and shared information through Let's Talk!, and we provided opportunities for people to give us feedback," Robinson says. "We also held community meetings where people could provide feedback and ask questions in person." As a result of its efforts, the district was able to implement cuts with minimal disruption.

In addition to the always-on listening that Fort Wayne conducts with Let's Talk!, the district also works with K12 *Insight* to conduct deeper listening through more specific managed survey engagements. When the district was working to establish a new teacher evaluation system that would affect teachers' pay, for example, it leveraged custom surveys to include teachers in those discussions.

Without a system to navigate this process, "we probably would have stumbled," Robinson says. Getting everyone on the same page helped the district move forward with confidence, and the backing of staff.

Let's Talk!
from K12 *Insight* ▶



BEYOND THE SURVEY

BUILDING A SERVICE-ORIENTED CULTURE

As the district's use of Let's Talk! grows, administrators go the extra mile to ensure that staff and community members are using the technology, and that they know it's there to help.

It's not enough to simply post a link to Let's Talk! on the district's website, Robinson says. Educators at every level of the school system must commit to using it. The technology only works "if, as a district, you already have a commitment to transparency and communicating," she points out.

District leaders continue working to build a culture of exceptional service in the Fort Wayne Community Schools by modeling effective communication to stakeholders, outlining clear expectations for all staff members (including how quickly they should respond to problems or questions from the community), and making sure they understand how to use the technology, with ample training.

At first, Robinson says, staff questioned whether the technology would consume too much time.

In reality, she says, Let's Talk! enables the district to streamline communications, providing better customer service without the time crunch.

"Let's Talk! has replaced some of the 'awkward' ways that we were communicating with our constituents," she says. "Now we have one way of engaging that allows us to be consistent across the district. All of the people who need to know about certain

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situations get notifications—and we're able to be better at communicating."

Building a culture of exceptional customer service involves following through on what you promise, Robinson says. That, in turn, builds community trust.

"There has to be a public understanding that you are open and transparent as a district," she says. "If you use the information they give you, people know you're paying attention. When people consistently see that you do what you said you were going to do, that instills an expectation that it's going to happen—and a trust that you will listen."

THE RESULT

THE FUTURE

A focus on exceptional customer service is a key reason why the Fort Wayne Community Schools feels like a community. That focus has led to stronger stakeholder engagement—which is closely tied to academic success.

“I think our focus on service has increased our credibility,” Robinson says. “Let’s Talk! has given people a way to feel important, because their opinions matter.” The community is also better informed—which reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings that can undermine district reforms.

Providing exceptional service “has to be part of your DNA,” Robinson says. “It can’t be phony. It becomes a habit that you’re a transparent district, from the board and the superintendent on down. And that’s the expectation you set with your community.”



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RESULTS

- 1 Greater trust and support from key constituents.
- 2 A more engaged and informed community, leading to better achievement.

