

CONCLUSION: A review of the information technology (IT) programs and expenditures for the reviewed Mississippi school districts in FY 2023 showed opportunities for districts to improve service levels and increase efficiency. Multiple school districts lack critical plans to manage technology and disaster recovery. Seven of the nine districts in the current cohort reported network bandwidth per student lower than the state median, the regional peer average, and the national peer range. There have been state and federal efforts to increase access to quality internet, but implementation of those efforts will take time.



BACKGROUND

In FY 2026, PEER received funding to contract with Level Data (GlimpseK12) to conduct a comparative review of nine school districts. This report focuses on one of six non-instructional areas of review—information technology (Volume III). Other non-instructional reports include:

- Finance and Supply Chain (Volume I);
- Human Resources (Volume II);
- Nutrition (Volume IV);
- Operations (Volume V); and,
- Transportation (Volume VI).

KEY FINDINGS

- **Of the nine districts in this cohort, six (67%) had a documented technology plan and six had a technology disaster recovery plan.**
Such plans are critical for managing technology and disaster recovery.
- **Of the nine districts in this cohort, none keep their data backups solely onsite.**
Offsite backup is critical to recovering vital records and data.
- **Five districts (56%) were unable to provide daily network usage.**
By tracking daily network usage, a district can identify potential network capacity problems and also have insight into network usage patterns.
- **The three districts that surveyed student households for FY 2023, reported that 70% or more of students' households had access to broadband internet and Wi-Fi capabilities at home.**
School districts play a critical role in providing students with broadband and Wi-Fi access at school for assignments.

- **All nine districts in this cohort reported network bandwidth per student below that of regional and national peers.**
Such a condition could have negative impacts on students' education.
- **For this cohort, six districts (67%) use a single department for traditional IT support and educational technology support functions. Three districts (33%) use two separate IT departments.**
Each model for IT support has advantages and disadvantages.

The Legislature has made efforts to expand broadband in the state, including the creation of the Broadband Expansion and Accessibility of Mississippi (BEAM) office in 2022. The office, functioning under the Mississippi Department of Finance and Administration, is responsible for overseeing all broadband expansion efforts in the state and will administer broadband grants. According to BEAM's website, in May 2023, the U.S. Department of the Treasury approved BEAM's plan for \$151.4 million through the Capital Projects Fund (CPF). BEAM approved 24 broadband projects to be funded by the CPF; these projects are projected to serve 27,000 households in 19 counties across the state.

Additionally, Mississippi was allocated \$1.2 billion from the federal Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program. Mississippi's BEAM office allocates these funds through grants to increase access to quality internet.

Although steps have been taken by policymakers to improve broadband access, implementation of the systems will take time.

A Look at Internet Bandwidth

- For FY 2023, the median network bandwidth per student was 0.96 megabits per second across all cohorts, while the regional peer average was 20.5 and the lower range for national peers was 248.4. These numbers clearly demonstrate the need for improved bandwidth in the districts.
- Seven of the nine districts in the current cohort reported network bandwidth per student lower than the state median, the regional peer average, and the national peer range.
 - The amount of network bandwidth per student ranged from 0.1 in Jackson City to 18.3 megabits per second (Mbit/s) in Forrest County Agricultural High School.
- Of four reporting districts, two (Harrison and Humphreys) reported 180 and 187 days in the school year in which internet usages reached more than 75% of standard available bandwidth for five minutes or longer. If districts and teachers have access to higher bandwidth, additional programs and assignments could become feasible.
- Districts should balance investments in internet bandwidth and the educational usage of devices.

Device Inventory and Staffing

Based on the data provided, the number of devices per district staff member ranged from 1.0 to 3.6. Four districts should remove obsolete devices from their inventories and then evaluate their staffing levels. In addition to the performance measures in this report, evaluation of staffing should include other factors (e.g., volume and complexity of support tickets, district goals, expertise of IT staff).

IT Spending Per Student

The IT spending per student for the current cohort ranged from \$121 in Jackson City to \$844 in Meridian. Four districts reported more IT spending per student than the state median, regional peer average, and national peer range.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTRICTS

1. In FY 2027, each district superintendent, in consultation with the district's technology program personnel, should review the information from this report and implement each of the relevant district recommendations to increase efficiency, improve service levels, and/or achieve cost-savings.
2. For districts that were unable to provide certain information during this review pertaining to their technology programs (e.g., network usage levels), technology program personnel should begin collecting and monitoring this data on an ongoing basis.
3. Technology program personnel should provide an annual report to the district superintendent regarding the status of the technology program using the measures included in this review.
4. Districts should continue investing in network bandwidth, especially those experiencing capacity issues.
5. Districts should look to their high-performing peers to determine strategies for becoming more cost-effective.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (MDE)

1. To aid school districts in creating technology and disaster recovery plans, MDE should develop a plan template and provide guidance documents for technology staff to use when developing these plans.
2. MDE should periodically (e.g., every two years) conduct the following surveys, which would enable it to better understand the resources and support needed to assist districts in improving their technology programs:
 - a. a detailed technology survey for district technology leaders; and,
 - b. a detailed survey for teaching staff regarding technology use in the classroom.

See report page 29 for a full list of recommendations.