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‘Collaboration and ingenuity’

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Flat River Community Library expands wireless hotspot program for Greenville students

By Cory Smith

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Flat River Community Library Marketing and Outreach Librarian Cassandra Vargo, left, and Library Director Stefanie Reed have a conversation at the library in Greenville on Thursday as they demonstrate use of new wireless internet hotspots that are available for checkout by any student at Greenville Public Schools with a library card thanks to a grant from the Greenville Area Community Foundation, funding the library's new Student Connectivity program. — DN Photo | Cory Smith

GREENVILLE — An expanded program at Flat River Community Library is aiming to fill a gap, providing area students with a resource to connect to a world that increasingly relies on digital technology.

For several years, the library has offered wireless internet hotspots as a resource to its members, available to check out as one would a library book.

According to Library Director Stefanie Reed, that effort is done to help promote digital literacy in an area where many still aren't able to obtain or afford reliable internet services.

“Digital literacy and digital connectivity have been a focus for public libraries pretty much since the computer came into existence,” she said. “Since the internet became an essential part of our lives, it has become an essential service. Ultimately our goal is not simply to provide print books, it's to provide access to information and services.”

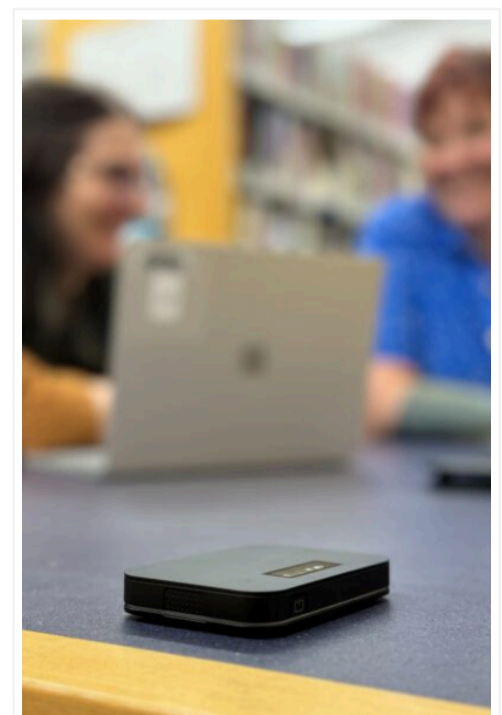
The library was not alone in such endeavors, as in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, school districts such as Greenville Public Schools took advantage of the federal Emergency Connectivity Program, established to help schools provide internet connectivity when students across the country were forced to attend school remotely due to government mandates.

That funding was utilized to offer items such as wireless hotspots to students, so there would be no restrictions for them to attend class virtually.

“Greenville, like a large number of other schools, took advantage of the program and they had hundreds of hotspots that they made available for any family that expressed a need for that connectivity,” Reed said.

However, as the pandemic has come and gone, so too now has that funding and resource offered by the school district as the U.S. Congress chose to defund the emergency connectivity funding.

Knowing that the federal funding source was going to be eliminated, Reed was contacted by GPS in 2023 with a request to see if there was anything the library could do to assist the school district in providing wireless connectivity for students who currently do not have access to the internet at home.



A total of 133 wireless internet hotspots are now available for checkout at the Flat River Community Library for students at Greenville Public Schools thanks to the library's new Student Connectivity program. The program was funded locally through a grant provided by the Greenville Area Community Foundation. —DN Photo | Cory Smith

“In that state of emergency we’re generally pretty good at stepping up and dealing with it when we have to in that moment, but as we move away from those moments, we don’t always do a good job of filling those gaps that are still there,” she said. “The school district has enough on their plate as it is. They knew it (hotspot program) was something we already had in place on a smaller scale for the general public, so they reached out.”

Reed said the library was on board to expand its wireless hotspot program while placing a focus on students; it just needed the funds to do so.

With no federal funding available, Reed took a chance on another funding source, one much more local — the Greenville Area Community Foundation.

In the spring, Reed submitted a grant request via the Foundation’s Spring Education Grant Cycle, hoping to receive funding to allow the library to provide a resource the school district could no longer accommodate.

To the delight of Reed, and now potentially numerous GPS students, the grant request was awarded, totaling \$34,750.

“We are very lucky to have the Greenville Area Community Foundation. They are a phenomenal organization,” Reed said. “They support so many amazing programs in this area and they are deeply invested, specifically in our community. That really does make a difference.”

As a result, Reed was able to work with its hotspot provider, T-Mobile, and expand upon its original offering of 25 hotspots to library patrons to add an additional 133 hotspots for GPS students.

“These 133 hotspots are specifically allocated for students, no one else is allowed to check them out,” Reed said. “While our 25 original hotspots are able to be rented out one week at a time, these new ones will be for six weeks at a time so the families of these students can have some continuity with them.”

Reed said the only conditions are that the students be enrolled at any GPS school and have a library card, though a focus will be placed on pairing the hotspots with students who otherwise have no internet availability away from school.”

“We’ve been provided with a list from the school district of individuals who have been designated, that they have this need, so we are prioritizing them,” Reed said.

Reed said any GPS students who live outside of the boundaries of the library are still able to participate in the rental program.

“These students, when they graduate, they have to have a minimum level of technological understanding just to function in any job, just to function day-to-day as human beings,” she said. “Tech literacy, it’s non-negotiable. It’s an essential skill. Do we want to graduate students that are missing that technology? No, because they are going to be at a disadvantage against any other students who have received that education.”

When Reed applied for the GACF grant, Superintendent Wayne Roedel expressed his full support behind the project.

“In recent years our school district has increasingly relied on online resources, digital platforms and Google Classrooms to support student learning both in the classroom and at home; however, we recognize that not all of our students have equitable access to the internet, which can create barriers to their academic success,” he said. “Expanding the Flat River Community Library’s hotspot program presents an innovative solution to this challenge. By providing internet-capable hotspots for home use, the library can ensure that students and families lacking reliable internet access have the tools to engage with their education fully.”

GACF Director of Community Investment Laura Montoye said the foundation had no problem supporting the initiative.

“The Greenville Public Schools Digital Connection Program at the Flat River Community Library is a model example of collaboration and ingenuity,” she said. “The Greenville Area Community Foundation enthusiastically supported the \$34,750 grant to the Flat River Community Library because it directly supports local students and leverages resources and expertise from multiple organizations.”

Montoye said the library’s already established relationship with T-Mobile in offering hotspots showed that the library had a plan that was “thorough and ready to launch.”

“The foundation applauds the work of the Flat River Community Library and Greenville Public Schools as they work together to bridge access gaps and allow students to fully engage in their education,” she said.

Reed said with no data available as to the percentage of GPS students who currently go without internet at home, she’s hopeful the expansion of the program will still be able to meet the needs of the community.

“This is a little bit exploratory, to see to what extent this will be utilized, but there are certain things you just can’t do from a personal device like a cell phone. Sometimes you need a laptop to do something a little more robust, like doing homework or research,” she said.

For those who would like to take advantage of the library’s expanded hotspot program, Reed said they simply need to stop in and register their GPS student with a library card if they don’t already have one.



Flat River Community Library Director Stefanie Reed looks over the more than 130 wireless internet hotspots now available to be checked out by any student at Greenville Public Schools via the library’s new Student Connectivity program. The program was funded locally through a grant provided by the Greenville Area Community Foundation. —DN Photo | Cory Smith

“Since the start of school we’ve already had 263 new student library registrations through the school district’s online enrollment program,” she said. “If they aren’t registered, they can walk right in and we will take care of that.”

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