

Raising the bar for student safety with FirstNet solutions



Agency/organization needs

Transportation officials for Blount, Jefferson, and St. Clair County Schools in north central Alabama chose FirstNet to up safety and communication between bus drivers and schools.



Networking solution

FirstNet Rapid Response is a push-to-talk solution that provides priority access to voice, data, video, location, and interoperability services on the nationwide FirstNet network



Agency value

Enhanced communication and priority network access using the FirstNet network



Industry focus

K-12 education



Size

Nearly 40,000 students across three county school systems

Boosting communication between bus drivers and schools

Nearly 24 million students rely on school buses to get to school every day.¹ From bright yellow coloring and flashing lights to bench safety belts and energy-absorbing seat backs, school buses are some of the safest vehicles on the road.² That safety is something school officials in St. Clair, Blount, and Jefferson counties in Alabama take very seriously. They're embracing advancements in wireless technology, using FirstNet to improve communication and safety incident response between bus fleets and schools.

As supervisor of transportation for St. Clair County Schools, Christopher Qualls has a unique perspective, having previously worked as a bus driver. "Most districts haven't really changed in the past 15 or 20 years," said Qualls. "And the biggest part of that is with technology."

Bus operators have traditionally used land mobile radios (LMRs) to communicate with schools and each other. An LMR is a push-to-talk two-way radio system. Looking back, Qualls recalls how little they were used. "I might've heard somebody on the radio five times in the five years I was driving," he said. "It just wasn't used."

St. Clair, Blount, and Jefferson County school districts have invested in FirstNet Rapid Response to provide instant communication between drivers, school districts, and safety professionals. FirstNet Rapid Response is a push-to-talk service that gives users priority access on the FirstNet network. "It's a totally different ballgame now," said Qualls. "It provides consistency and an easy way to communicate with everyone."

¹ "NHTSA's Unedited Summary of School Bus Report," California Department of Education, January 21, 2025, www.cde.ca.gov/ls/tn/or/nhtsa3702.asp.

² "School Bus Safety," National Transportation Safety Board, Accessed April 1, 2025, www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/school-bus-safety.

Coverage that goes the distance for schools, students, and public safety

Putting child safety first

Ken Parker is the director of transportation and maintenance for Blount County Schools. With more than half of his 7,500 students traveling by bus each day, safety is always top of mind. However, Parker is quick to point out that the district does careful research before any money is spent. For starters, nearly 60 percent of county students qualify for reduced-price lunches. “That gives you an idea of the economics of our county. We are a very well-run school system, and consistently in the top third in the state in student assessments,” said Parker. “But we’re in the bottom 10 in the state per pupil expenditures. We really pride ourselves on getting a lot of bang for every buck we spend.”

Like Parker, Jefferson County Schools Director of Transportation Kevin Snowden is responsible for transporting 20,000 students daily on 488 buses traveling roughly 4.4 million miles each year. “We value the opportunity to create a safe environment for our children,” he said. “We train our bus drivers thoroughly and vet them well so that we know that they’re safe to carry children.”



Qualls, Parker, and Snowden agree—the instant communication and reliability of FirstNet Rapid Response enables them to stay informed and respond quickly. “Just this morning a driver called in sick, so we had to dispatch another driver and alert the schools to let the parents know we might be running a little late on that route,” said Snowden. “Being able to communicate well is a very good thing.”

Highly effective communication

For years, most school districts and school bus operators used LMRs to communicate even if they weren’t always convenient. “It was awful having to maintain licenses and towers, and you couldn’t have a private conversation with one driver. Everybody heard everything,” said Parker. “There were reception issues and equipment issues. We knew there had to be something better.” As an alternative, Blount County initially turned to an Alabama-based push-to-talk provider only to find their coverage didn’t measure up.

Several years ago, all three Alabama county school districts shifted their communications to FirstNet Rapid Response. The service is built on the FirstNet network, which was created in response to the events of September 11, 2001, to provide a nationwide broadband network for first responders.

FirstNet is the only nationwide communications platform built with and for public safety to prioritize connectivity and communication during safety and emergency incidents—something Qualls has experienced firsthand.

“In any emergency, it’s important that we’re able to communicate with everyone,” said Qualls, citing a recent event in which one of his schools went into lockdown. Although the incident turned out to be a false alarm, school officials and drivers received the warning simultaneously, enabling them to react quickly. “It became very clear that the FirstNet Rapid Response system is highly effective. It allows direct communication with schools, the drivers’ central office, transportation, and law enforcement. Response time sped up. Everybody could hear what was going on, so that was definitely a big help.”

Enhanced mobility and pre-configured equipment power quick adoption

Keeping parents informed

With more than 480,000 school buses on the road nationwide every day, safety incidents are inevitable.³ A student may get off at the wrong stop. Or a bus may be involved in a vehicle accident. With FirstNet, Blount, St. Clair, and Jefferson school officials can stay on top of any event. Recently, Snowden heard from a driver whose transmission failed with a dozen students on board. The driver was able to quickly contact the school to let parents know another bus had been dispatched to take the students home.

Thanks to FirstNet Rapid Response, communication in Jefferson County schools has been more consistent, reliable, and faster. Officials in St. Clair County agree. “FirstNet has been a huge benefit. We deal with a lot of vendors, and our FirstNet account rep has by far been the most reliable,” Qualls said. “He’s informative and responsive. He just wants to help where we need help. It’s been hands down the best customer service of any vendor that we use.”

FirstNet Rapid Response has been equally well received in Blount County. “There’s just an increased usability and the ability to have multiple concurrent conversations,” said Parker. “For example, my bus drivers don’t need to hear all my maintenance calls, so with the AT&T admin console, we’ve been able to customize who hears what, and it’s just so much better than it was. Communication is no longer an issue for us.”

The district’s school resource officers also use FirstNet Rapid Response, giving them a direct line to first responders should the need arise. “Our point of contact with law enforcement is always through that school resource officer,” said Parker. “And they can basically call in any additional support.”



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Christopher Qualls,
Director of Transportation
St. Clair County School

³ “School Bus Fast Facts,” New York School Bus Contractor’s Association, Accessed April 3, 2025, www.nysbca.com/fastfacts.

Priority access on a network reserved exclusively for public safety

Portable and ready to go

Parker appreciates FirstNet Rapid Response for its enhanced mobility. If students need to evacuate a bus during an incident, the driver can remove the handset from its cradle and take it with them. This wasn't possible with stationary LMRs. Blount County's 160 Rapid Response devices also arrived pre-configured. That was a huge relief for a district with limited resources. "It was wonderful just to pull them out of the box and hand them out instead of having to do a lot of customization and configuration," he said.

Snowden has been equally pleased. "Our representative has done a tremendous job for Jefferson County, keeping us informed and equipped with everything we need to get the job done," he said. "We've never had any issues or complaints."

Qualls has been so impressed he's recommending FirstNet Rapid Response to other districts. "We communicate a lot with each other because we're all in the same boat. And we're going to share anything that anybody has that can help benefit another system."

Parker agrees. "I don't see how anybody could be doing any better with their communications and safety on their school buses," he said. "I've used an LMR, and I've used a different push-to-talk provider, and nobody came close to FirstNet."

Connecting when it matters

Because the FirstNet network operates in part on a spectrum separate from regular wireless traffic, officials like Parker are confident they can reach who they need to, even in extreme circumstances. That's something they couldn't do with two-way radios. "FirstNet has always seemed to be on the cutting edge of capabilities and what they're offering. In the event of an emergency such as a major storm, we're on a different band than the typical cellular customer, so there are a lot of times when I've had service while others didn't because of the FirstNet prioritization," he said.

Overall, the service and expertise Parker, Snowden, and Qualls have received from FirstNet and AT&T has made a huge difference in improving communication in their school systems. "I couldn't be happier with FirstNet and the support we've gotten," said Parker. "We're kind of like a trucking company except we're hauling the most precious cargo on Earth. I'm glad to work with FirstNet to make sure that we're doing everything we can to provide safety and security for our students."

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