CHAPTER 9
ACCESS

The future has arrived—
it’s just not evenly distributed yet.
—William Gibson

It began on a cool fall evening in October 2014, in a remote section of Coachella Valley, California. A school bus rolled to a stop in front of a house to drop off its last few students for the day. Nothing out of the ordinary there. But then the drivers did something strange. Rather than return the buses to their designated lots, they parked them in some of the poorest communities of the Coachella Valley Unified School District (CVUSD). Then the drivers then got out and went home, leaving the school buses unattended.
While there wasn’t anything notably distinguishable about these buses from the outside, glancing inside would have revealed something quite extraordinary. The buses had been turned into mobile hotspots. Along with the thousands of iPads that had been provided to Coachella Valley’s students, these buses were about to give some of America’s poorest students their first-ever access to the internet. From that day on, Coachella Valley school buses would not just bring home kids, they would bring home iPad and internet access.

“We call it ‘Wi-Fi on Wheels,’” Dr. Darryl Adams announced proudly during an interview at the time. “And it’s going to change the lives of our kids in ways they can’t even imagine.”

Adams, a former Los Angeles Teacher of the Year turned district superintendent, was brought in to shake things up at Coachella Valley Schools, which had the unfortunate distinction of being one of the poorest district in the entire country. Many of its communities are in very rural areas, and of their 20,000 students, the luckiest ones lived in shabby trailer parks, while other, not-so-lucky ones often spent nights sleeping in alleys, parks, and abandoned railroad cars. With a 94 percent poverty rate, few CVUSD parents had their own cars, much less their own houses. Public transportation was spotty at best. Few people had computers, and the luxury of the internet was nearly unthinkable. All of this left most students with no way of accessing the most basic news, information, and services.

One of the first things Adams wanted to do as superintendent was change this. “Without access,” he said, “there are few opportunities to succeed in anything.” There had to be a way to get these families access to the internet and provide them with some of the same basic opportunities that more fortunate kids had. The question was, how?
Darryl Adams is a fun and highly creative man. He had taught music to high school students among the bright lights of Los Angeles, and now called himself the “Rock and Roll Superintendent.” He found that it made people smile—which is not always easy to do for people who are struggling just to survive. But the name also told people something else about him. It told them that Adams was different, and that he wasn’t interested in falling in line with tradition. He was someone who thought outside the box, and it was this thinking that led him to the idea of putting solar-powered Wi-Fi hotspots on school buses and leaving them scattered throughout the communities they served.

It didn’t take Adams long to convince the school board and voters to use bond funding to start a Mobile Learning Initiative, which included free iPads for every student in the district along with the Wi-Fi on Wheels program. “We wanted to ensure that students had 24/7 access to the internet,” Adams said. “Learning does not stop at the end of the day.” Along with the iPads and internet, a new curriculum was also added that allowed students to begin preparing for specific careers like engineering, aviation, science, and sports.

The results? Within a year attendance rates went up, student motivation and engagement increased, and the graduation rate grew from 70 percent to 80 percent. Adams went on to be recognized by President Obama as one of the Top 100 Innovative Superintendents in America and by the Center for Digital Education as one of its Top 30 Technologists, Transformers, & Trailblazers in America. But as nice as those recognitions are, it doesn’t take long for Adams, when asked about them, to wave them off and focus back on his true passion—his students. “These kids are coding now and flying drones,” he said with a smile.