Interview of **ROD RUSSEAU**

KAREN WETZEL: Hello. My name is Karen Wetzel, and I am manager of the NIST framework at the National Initiative for Cybersecurity Education, or NICE, at NIST. The NICE Cybersecurity Workforce Framework, published as NIST Special Publication 800-181, establishes a taxonomy and common language used to describe cybersecurity work. The NICE framework is intended to be applied in the private, public, and academic sectors. In this edition of the NICE e-newsletter series *Framework in Focus*, it is my pleasure to speak with Rod Russeau, Director of Technology and Information Services at Community High School District 99 in Downers Grove, Illinois.

Rod, thank you for letting us learn more about your career pathway and understand the NICE framework from your perspective.

ROD RUSSEAU: Thank you, Karen, for the introduction, and I'm really happy to be here.

KAREN WETZEL: As are we. So let's get started by just hearing a little bit more about your tole and responsibilities as Director of Technology and Information Services at District 99.

ROD RUSSEAU: Sure. Thank you. District 99 is located about an hour west of Chicago, and for those not familiar—I'm not sure, Karen, if you're familiar with how school districts are portioned out in the State of Illinois—we're kind of unique, I think, in that we have some districts like ours that are a high school district. We have two high schools, 5,000 kids total, so large comprehensive high schools, but the entirety of our district is those two schools. And we have six K-through-8 school districts, separate, independent school districts that feed kids in to us.

And my kids went to a K-12 unit district of about 25,000 kids, no more than about 20 minutes west of here. So Illinois is kind of made up of many smaller school districts and some large ones as well.

So we are, again, a comprehensive high school district. My role here as Technology and Information Services Director, I've been with the district 26 years. So I've seen the district through a lot over that time, and basically, my role is a cabinet-level position. So I report to the superintendent, and I'm responsible for all—just managing all of the technology within the district, the budget, the planning, maintaining the data systems, the overall network infrastructure.

My role has changed exponentially really over that time that I have been here and especially in the last 5 years or so. I have a slide that I've used over the last few years in presentations, one to the board of education that I can remember, where I show the bandwidth allocation that we've used in the district for internet connectivity over the years, and back when I started in '96, we had a T1 line. And that was all we had. Internet was there, but not too many people

used it. And it went along that same low pathway for about 15 years or so, and, man, in the last few years, if you could see my hand, it's going straight up to the sky. It's just an astronomical increase.

And not only has that happened to bandwidth. I used that as an analogy for just technology overall, the complexity, the reliance upon technology. I used to joke to some of the people on staff here, "Oh, we're not a 911 call center. If it's down for a little while, you know, folks will be okay." We're not—life or death doesn't happen if technology is unavailable for a time in a school district but pretty close. You know, there's a lot of people that really rely on it.

And I will say, Karen, that one of the things that definitely as part of that acceleration of technology that's ramped up, especially in the past 2 or 3 years, has been information security, cybersecurity that we're talking about today, and data privacy. To me, those two things go hand in hand. You can't have one without the other, and a lot of states, including Illinois, have really ramped up the data privacy requirements. We had a major piece of legislation go into effect last July that just dramatically changed the requirements no us and vendors with which we share data.

So, sorry, I rambled a lot there. I guess I've been here a long time, and a lot of things are going on in the technology world in school districts.

KAREN WETZEL: I bet, yeah. It really is a different world, and with your amount of time there, having that bird's-eye view and to those changes, I can imagine you really do see it. And I'm not surprised about your comment too about the information security and privacy going hand in hand.

ROD RUSSEAU: Right.

KAREN WETZEL: I think we're seeing that overall, and certainly, here at NIST, we collaborate very closely with our privacy engineering team here.

ROD RUSSEAU: I'm sure.

KAREN WETZEL: So, you know, I did talk a bit about our team, but let me ask you about your team. So I imagine you have a lot of folks who work with you, with as many students as you're dealing, even with those two high schools. I imagine there's quite a bit of outreach that needs to happen. What kinds of work—what kinds of folks are on your team, and what kinds of roles do they fill?

ROD RUSSEAU: Sure, sure. Thank you. Again, as time has went on here, when I started with the district, it was me and a computer operator and a couple teachers in the buildings that liked to dabble in technology.

[Laughter.]

ROD RUSSEAU: So we've definitely grown since then. The total IT staff across the district, we have about 17 people, and we're very blessed that the board of education has recognized that supporting technology is important. One can never have enough people, but we feel that we really do a good job in having that covered.

More specifically, here at the district office with me, I have three people that work directly with me here: a network infrastructure manager, a network systems administrator, and an information systems manager. And the first two roles I mentioned, just as their titles would suggest, take care of the overall network infrastructure and all of the connectivity and security and things that go along with that, and our infrastructure systems manager, basically all of our data and information system needs, student information system, finance, HR systems, and just a myriad of other systems in which we house data and people rely upon. When I started, that was what I did in addition to everything else, but we've kind of grown in that way.

And in each of the two high schools, we have six, seven people in each of the buildings. We have a network supervisor there that does some of the local network administration tasks in the school building and IT support technicians that report in to that person that—think of just your help desk staff and some higher-level technicians that really get in and troubleshoot issues and deploy new technologies and those things.

In addition to the pure IT support side of things, obviously, supporting teachers and what they do with technology is extremely important. We have an instructional technology coordinator in each building, a full-time position, former teachers in the district that now devote all of their time to basically helping teachers integrate technology into their classrooms with their kids, and then we also have—this name is maybe a little bit dated, but we still call them "curricular technology consultants" that are basically—we have about six teachers in each building that are released from one teaching assignment per teacher. So they have an extra period free during the day, and they're kind of the additional hands for the instructional technology coordinators. If a teacher is getting ready to use a new piece of technology, maybe they just need or want somebody in the classroom with them, you know, to kind of help them get that started.

When it comes to cybersecurity, information security, it's our team here at the district office, and we really don't have—we don't have CISO on-site. We don't have somebody whose main job is security. We share that.

KAREN WETZEL: Okay.

ROD RUSSEAU: And, probably, until you get into some of the very large school districts, our scenario here is quite common. Where I've been talking with the superintendent and other leaders here, looking ahead, I'm just kind of previewing for them. Don't be surprised in the relatively near future. You will see us and many school districts needing a security position on staff.

KAREN WETZEL: One of the—

ROD RUSSEAU: What—oh, sorry, Karen.

KAREN WETZEL: No, go ahead.

ROD RUSSEAU: Oh, no, just one other thing I was going to add to that point is one of the things we do to try to fill that void a little bit is we use a virtual chief information security officer. I was at a CoSN conference out in Portland, actually, the last, like, pre-pandemic conference that I went to, I think, and I met Ryan Cloutier at that conference and through some connections ended up working with him as our vCISO, and that really gives us—without having hired a full-time security position on staff, it gives us that regular touch base with someone who can really help us. He really helped us focus on risk management and kind of just pointing us in a good direction there. So we've used that to augment our staff a little bit as well.

KAREN WETZEL: I think that's probably—just like you were saying with not having a CISO, I think that's fairly common as a strategy, at least we're hearing that more often of having these kinds of additional roles.

ROD RUSSEAU: Right.

KAREN WETZEL: Your description also reminds me of one of the things that we talk about with the NICE framework is the use of these different kinds of roles where the role could be someone's entire job. It could be part of their job. It could be a team is responsible for a role, and it sounds like in some ways, you all—because there's not a single point of person—are really responsible for cybersecurity across the board. It is more of a true team-based approach.

ROD RUSSEAU: Right, right.

KAREN WETZEL: I'm just going to jump ahead and ask it, since I was mentioning the framework there. We look at the NICE Cybersecurity Workforce Framework as a tool for people to understand the kinds of work that's needed and how to mitigate risk, as you were talking about. Have you been able to use it to guide your own career or in your work at your organization, or do you see it perhaps as being useful for people who are maybe interested in joining into this kind of field and into K-12 cybersecurity?

ROD RUSSEAU: Yeah. I really like—you know, I should mention too that although I've been in the technology field since 1977—so I'm an old sorts at this—I more recently, as early as 2018, got into really deep into cybersecurity and earned my CISM, my CISSP, and just by happenstance, really, I just started taking those just to learn more about them and realized, oh, maybe I can earn these certificates as well. So I'm kind of late to that game, but it 's really opened my eyes to the world, paying attention to the organizational objectives that are just so critical to manage risk in an organization and especially in a school district. And I really liked reviewing the NICE framework of how the focus is built around that, splitting it out into the major three buckets of what knowledge do you have, what are the skills and the tasks that go along with that.

As I think about people that we have on staff or that we would be looking to bring on staff, some of the terms that stuck out for me pretty strongly there were the ideas of agility and flexibility. There's so much of that, always was in our world and in our field, but today, especially, there's just so much change that's coming at us so rapidly. It's just really critical that those concepts be really first on the mind.

KAREN WETZEL: In some ways, I think where you are in the K-12 environment, you're probably seeing a lot of that earlier. You're having teachers and students who are maybe early adopters and interested in as lot of things and seeing how cybersecurity issues might play out in that space or with new technologies as they come about.

ROD RUSSEAU: Right.

KAREN WETZEL: So you're really having to be responsive to change and be anticipating what kinds of security measures might need to be put in place as these changes come about too.

ROD RUSSEAU: Right. Yeah. I know, Karen, when I first—the first half of my career, I was actually in software development with a software development firm and spent those years developing, maintaining, supporting, programming student information systems, financial information systems for school districts all around the country, and eventually, through enough mergers and acquisitions, I found myself—you know, I've been working in schools for all that time. It's time to go work for a school.

And I thought I'd be bored. Well, not so much.

[Laughter.]

ROD RUSSEAU: As you kind of alluded to, there's new challenges every day. There's so much changing in our world and especially in schools and what we provide and support.

KAREN WETZEL: You've touched on a little bit there, but I did want to ask you about your career path—

ROD RUSSEAU: Oh, sure.

KAREN WETZEL: —and how you came to this position.

ROD RUSSEAU: Yeah, yeah. So I actually—I did start out in 1977 as a computer operator at a high school district about an hour north of us here. Long story how I got there. And this was—if you can think back to 1997, this was a school district similar to our size, about 5,000 kids. The entirety of the student information, financial HR information systems was run on a minicomputer with 96K of memory and a 40-megabyte disk drive, if you can even think in those terms. Like, my watch has like 100—

KAREN WETZEL: Right.

ROD RUSSEAU: —times more power and capacity than that.

But, anyway, I taught myself program in COBOL, which was the language that was being used there, got to know the software developers, and in a little less than a year, they offered me a job as the seventh employee of their small group. And, anyway, that group, I was with that group for about 16, years. We grew, mergers, acquisitions. We had customers in about 35 states, and I think I traveled to virtually all of them, meeting with school districts, installing software, training.

And then, you know, again, through mergers and acquisitions, I went to work for a school district not too far from here in '94 as their data processing director, still back when technology in schools was kind of data processing, you know. And my second year there, it was just on that cusp where technology was becoming a thing in school districts that we really needed to pay attention to. So they created a technology director role and filled that for a year, and then in my current district, the data processing director was retiring. And our superintendent at that time, pretty forward thinking, again, back in '96, created the role that I'm in today, made it a cabinet-level position reporting to him, which for many districts, it took many, many years to get the technology leader at the superintendent's table. For so long in school districts, the technology department reported maybe to the business office, or if the technology leader happened to be someone that kind of came from the instructional side of the house, like to the curriculum director. So, yeah, that's kind of my work history.

And like I said, through CoSN, actually, in 2018, I took a cybersecurity class that Amy McLaughlin with CoSN was teaching. It was an online class, and she had earned her Certified Information Security Manager certificate, his CISM. I was curious about that. I looked into it, and long story short, I pursued it and I got it. It really spoke to me because it covers really the governance, the management side of security much more than the technical side, which as a manager, as a leader of technology in the school district, that really applied directly to me.

And then I happened to find company called FRSecure and SecurityStudio offer an annual CISSP mentor program, totally free. It's an online, like, 6-, 8-week program. I enrolled in that program with the sole purpose of just learning more, no intention at all to earn the CISSP. I thought it was way too technical. I was surprised, though, as I got halfway through it that so much of it is still all about managing risk and governance, and it really focuses at that level. Indeed, there's lots of technical stuff. So I eventually pursued that as well.

So it's kind of funny. I went for all those years in my career just kind of learning on my own as I went and then kind of saved the very end to get some letters after my name.

[Laughter.]

ROD RUSSEAU: And I did through kind of what connected me—one of the things that connected me with you today, Karen, is through a lot of the friendships and connections that I made through my journey of the past 5 or 6 years had connected me with Keith Krueger and Amy McLaughlin of CoSN, and back in 2020, they offered me the role of being the chairperson of—with CoSN Cybersecurity Initiative. So I worked with Amy on that committee as well, which is kind of the connection that brought us together today.

KAREN WETZEL: Yes, indeed. One of the themes, I think, that I hear most often in these interviews is how engaging with the community, how helpful that can be in deciding where to go and providing opportunities an a way to give back as well. That is a definitely positive for people who are in this field, the cybersecurity community being so open and having so many different opportunities available.

ROD RUSSEAU: Sure.

KAREN WETZEL: It's interesting. You touched on some of the things that I've also been talking about with some folks this week around the technical versus the maybe more managerial side of cybersecurity.

ROD RUSSEAU: Right.

KAREN WETZEL: I had a call earlier this week where they were talking about how many people are going into the field but not always knowing about the business of cybersecurity, and with your reporting line, that really shows me that there's an understanding of the business of technology and cybersecurity as part of what is helping an organization to grow, to provide whatever it's providing, you know, what services it's providing, and the technology and, of course, cybersecurity and the privacy, as you've touched on, are really the underpinnings of an organization.

ROD RUSSEAU: Right.

KAREN WETZEL: And it's not something that can just be looked at over here, that there's a process.

ROD RUSSEAU: Oh, totally. Right, yeah. Yeah. It's so important to help people understand that there's a difference between responsibility and accountability—

KAREN WETZEL: Yeah.

ROD RUSSEAU: —where kind of everybody is responsible for security. Like, I'm responsible not to burn my office down by burning candles in here that are left alone, but I'm not responsible or accountable for fire safety in the district, and much the same with security. You know, everybody has a responsibility to do things that promote security. I have very specific responsibilities for security. Ultimately, though, the district leadership, the superintendent, and

that key administrative team are accountable for information security, just like they're accountable for everything else that happens or doesn't happen. So part of our job is to really educate them on here's an important function that you fulfill in keeping our district secure. There's lots of decisions that you need to make to help direct us to understand what risk you're willing to accept, what should be mitigated and not. So, yeah, it's kind of an eye-opener for some people to think of things in that way, but it's so terribly critical.

KAREN WETZEL: And United States how one can move forward with, you know, your risk tolerance, understanding what that is and understanding how to mitigate risks, but in a way that's not always negative too. I think people often look at folks, perhaps technologists or cybersecurity specialists in particular, as being the place where things stop.

ROD RUSSEAU: Right.

KAREN WETZEL: Whereas, I think that's not the case. It's really about building and being anticipatory so that you're not having to put a stop on things because it hadn't been considered earlier.

ROD RUSSEAU: For sure.

KAREN WETZEL: You know, that's when the stops happen. It's like, oh, you didn't think of that, so we're going to have to stop everything and go back and redo it with cybersecurity and privacy considerations aligned by building it earlier and having people aware of it earlier. It actually enables progress and enables a lot of activities.

ROD RUSSEAU: Of course.

KAREN WETZEL: You know, you've touched a little bit about the letters behind your name. It sounds like for you and for your career, the cybersecurity certifications obviously haven't been as much of a factor. Are you finding that perhaps with District 99 or with these other relationships you're building that—what do you think is the importance of that academic degree or that credential? What do you think the best approach is when it comes to those?

ROD RUSSEAU: Yeah, that's an interesting question, Karen. As you could tell based on my story, I built quite a lengthy career without formal certifications, and again, I use them more as a learning tool, that really I'm not as much—when I'd be looking at filling a role, sure, certifications show me that someone has dedicated the time and resources. And I can speak form personal experience. The CISSP especially takes a lot of time and energy to earn that, and I can also tell you that in working with Ryan, our vCISO, who is a CISSP as well, yes, we have the same letters after our name. I don't have 15 years of experience doing nothing but cybersecurity work.

KAREN WETZEL: Right.

ROD RUSSEAU: So just the letters alone to me, I think, definitely show a commitment and a dedication and build up a body of knowledge and awareness within someone, as it has with me, and I don't necessarily think that that alone is something that declares me an expert. So I think they're an important consideration for kind of those reasons I mentioned, but I don't think they're the be-all and end-all.

KAREN WETZEL: Yeah, absolutely, and starting to understand—I think that's one thing that the NICE Framework tries to do is—and as we look to align to a lot of these certifications too is to look at what are the knowledge and skills that are underlying those that someone might need to know, and at times, it may be that you're gained that through the certification. But at other times, you may have gained it through that work experience. So understanding what is actually sort of being looked for in a position versus just those letters alone, I think, is valid, very valid.

ROD RUSSEAU: Right.

KAREN WETZEL: It sounds like you're very interested in your continuous learning and making sure that that's something that you dedicate your time to. Are there other tricks that you use to keep your skills and maybe those of your team sharp and current?

ROD RUSSEAU: Yeah. You know, I think, again, I've mentioned our vCISO a number of times, but that has been just so helpful on so many levels. One, just to help us celebrate what we were already doing well, fine-tune and improve areas that we needed to, and really oftentimes pull our heads out of the technical and get us more into the organizational and risk side.

So many of our interactions there are learning experiences. So I think that certainly is one way that I do and we as a team kind of keep ourselves current and growing is by interacting with people like Ryan who know more than us and can really help us learn in that way.

Another tremendous resource that we have is through CoSN, and specifically, there are state chapters of CoSN. Ours in Illinois is IETL, Illinois Education Technology Leaders, I think. But, anyway, the state chapter of CoSN, tremendous interactive, openly sharing helpful group, so not only in the periodic face-to-face conferences that we would have but just constant. I get a number of emails a day from the group sharing about things, wanting to learn about things. So there's really a tremendous amount of interaction and learning that occurs there.

And in today's world, there is just—there's so many periodicals and newsletters and workshops and, you know, things like that.

KAREN WETZEL: Webinars.

ROD RUSSEAU: Yeah. You can get a little overwhelmed with those at times. We really, through our relationships, I think, is really one of the most important learning tools that we found.

In my case, some of—like that early relationship I had with Amy McLaughlin from taking her class in CoSN got me curious about the CISM and made connections, and one thing led to another, and all of a sudden, we're talking today, you know?

[Laughter.[

ROD RUSSEAU: So I think the connections you make with people just can't be understated.

KAREN WETZEL: Thank you for that. When it comes to—you mentioning the—is it the—I'm sorry. You used the term that I am not forgetting for your—

ROD RUSSEAU: Oh, the vCISO, the virtual Chief Information Security Officer?

KAREN WETZEL: vCISO, there you go. Virtual. There we go.

ROD RUSSEAU: Yeah.

KAREN WETZEL: I couldn't remember if it was "v" or "e" over electronic.

ROD RUSSEAU: Yeah, yeah. "V" is for virtual, yep.

KAREN WETZEL: I was thinking how oftentimes—how important it is to have that kind of additional insights on your team, and it sounds like this person is definitely part of your team—

ROD RUSSEAU: Right.

KAREN WETZEL: To be able to bring in those direct kinds of experiences and perspectives. It's important. Oftentimes you'll hear in hiring people, looking for the right fit, and we want to make sure people fit with the team. I actually don't like that language. I like the language of looking for who maybe is bringing something to the team that doesn't already exist. So it's not always the fit. It's the what's this person bringing that we don't have, so that we can bring in different insights in to the team. So you're not looking for the same of what you already have.

ROD RUSSEAU: Right, right.

KAREN WETZEL: So I'm saying all this because it prefaces my next question of diversity in the workforce.

ROD RUSSEAU: Sure.

KAREN WETZEL: So understanding how that plays out for you and for District 99 and how you're seeing that perhaps in just the field in general.

ROD RUSSEAU: Right, right. And one other thing I might mention, Karen, as we're talking about—kind of talking about the qualities of people that you are looking to hire, I think although we're talking about technical things here, I think that the soft skills, for lack of a better term—

KAREN WETZEL: Yep.

ROD RUSSEAU: —are just credibly critical, especially communication. I think technology, like strong technology people, sometimes I think, truthfully so, but oftentimes are pigeonholed as well. They're a tech person. Just put them in a backroom somewhere. I think that's one of the things that's gotten me to where I'm at today is, yeah, I'm a tech guy. I mean, I understand a lot of the technology parts of things, and I can work well with people, and I can communicate. So I think, you know, it's easier to teach specific technology concepts and particular things than it is to kind of teach those softer skills. So I think those are really important to look for.

KAREN WETZEL: Absolutely.

ROD RUSSEAU: Okay. Yeah. I know as a district, District 99 is and has always been really focused on hiring a diverse staff. We're in the western suburbs of Chicago here. So we, especially in one of our buildings, are not very diverse, and we're really looking to increase that diversity. So from the board of education down through the district leadership and in our human resources offices, we just have a strong focus on that.

I know we attend job fairs that are specifically geared toward minorities. We visit selected universities in the area that are really promoting that as well. We have incentive programs in place, and we're just—the district is always making the hiring managers in the district very aware of this, tracking data, and we're really doing our best to try to make sure that that's always present and front of mind and that we continue to move in that direction.

KAREN WETZEL: It is important. I think it's so easy to say, oh, we hadn't thought of that. Really highlight that and have that be a part of these conversations and have the data around it is so important to making sure that it is going to be a consideration, and it's just so important for the success of our jobs, of our work, and to have that diversity in all aspects of it, racial, gender, you know, all of that.

ROD RUSSEAU: Sure.

KAREN WETZEL: It's economic. That's great to know that you all are working on that.

ROD RUSSEAU: Yeah.

KAREN WETZEL: So it sounds like you're really enjoying your work with what you do. What is it that you enjoy most with your work at District 99—

ROD RUSSEAU: Yeah.

KAREN WETZEL: —and your specific role?

ROD RUSSEAU: Right. You know, first, my team is amazing. Specifically, just the three people that I work here in the district, in my 45-year career, I've never worked with just a more collaborative, supportive, just strong group that just makes coming to work great every day.

And the environment that we're in here is, again, that idea that I had early on, "Oh, I'm going to be—[audio break]—when I go work for a school district." Hard to find sometimes a more challenging and rapidly changing environment. Gosh, think COVID.

KAREN WETZEL: Yes.

ROD RUSSEAU: You know, all educational institutions had to just change on a dime, just like the rest of the world, but we don't go through that magnitude of change very day, and there's always—

KAREN WETZEL: Thank goodness.

ROD RUSSEAU: Yeah. There's always something, always something going on, and just knowing that although oftentimes we're somewhat far removed, but just that we're—ultimately, we're helping support students and their learning. So we try to keep that in our mind when we're, you know, going in the trenches a little bit and having to deal with some of those issues. So, yeah, yeah, it's just, you know, I've had a really good career, and I'm really enjoying the place that we're at.

KAREN WETZEL: Well, and that speaks highly of your team. That's really nice. It does go to the idea of the soft skills, those professional skills—

ROD RUSSEAU: Right.

KAREN WETZEL: —and how important they are—

ROD RUSSEAU: Right.

KAREN WETZEL: —being able to have a good relationship with your team. It's not depending on the technology and capabilities, how technical someone is or good at coding.

ROD RUSSEAU: For sure. Yeah, yeah. You can teach that to some level, but you can't teach the other stuff as well for sure.

KAREN WETZEL: You know, we hadn't touched on the impact of COVID, and I know we're sort of nearing the end of my questions here.

ROD RUSSEAU: Sure.

KAREN WETZEL: But it does, I think, take a—I think I would take a moment to ask about that and how that maybe had an impact, obviously, when it comes to providing technology, but the cybersecurity aspect of that would have been, I'm sure, a big question, as all of a sudden things quickly move in that direction.

ROD RUSSEAU: Right.

KAREN WETZEL: What kind of—what's the biggest takeaway or maybe the biggest challenge that you had with that?

ROD RUSSEAU: That's a good question. We were in pretty good shape when it came to students and providing them access from home since we had been one-to-one with Chromebooks for about 6 years or so already. So our students already each had a Chromebook that they brought home.

KAREN WETZEL: Mm-hmm.

ROD RUSSEAU: So students kind of were able to continue moving in that direction. Staff had laptops that they were able to bring home.

I think from an IT support side of things, we had to put some things in place pretty quickly when it came to supporting teachers and their devices and needs around them. We were accustomed to always being able to have them come to the mothership, come to the district, and we'll take care of it. So there were some remote things that we had to put in place.

We already had a pretty good structure in place for requiring VPN access for certain things. We needed to increase that a little bit. One of the biggest, I think, challenges we found was some of our labs that we had in the buildings for students, more specific applications that required computing power in the district like your AutoCAD classes, your digital photography classes, we had to come up with a concept pretty quickly to allow through virtual desktops and other things to have students work on those on their Chromebooks at home.

From an applications standpoint, we kind of had a feeding frenzy, if you will, initially of requests for different online applications and such that teachers were requesting to try to supplement and fill gaps that maybe they needed now that all the instruction was done remotely. So that put some pressure on us too. Our normal process to vet an application from a security standpoint, a data privacy standpoint, we had to ramp up those tools a little bit as well.

And in the—just the online instruction side of that, we pretty quickly had to acquire licenses for Zoom, and all of the Zoom bombing and technical things that were going on with that were a challenge for everybody for a while.

KAREN WETZEL: It sounds, though—

ROD RUSSEAU: One of the things, Karen, that was kind of in the back of our mind and we were paying special attention to was, from a cybersecurity standpoint, while I think we—since we already kind of had an ecosystem in place that supported and secured students and teachers, you know, periodically working from home, we were on high alert, really, for the fact of just during COVID, during any crisis of any kind, the phishing campaigns, the attacks can kind of go after other things when you're not necessarily paying attention because all of your energies are focused elsewhere.

So we actually have a phishing awareness campaign that we—two times a month, we will phish the staff and help them, just again, just bring awareness and just an ongoing education program, and we didn't suspend that. I know some districts did, but we just felt it was so important. The real world isn't going to stop phishing you, so we shouldn't stop educating you.

KAREN WETZEL: Right.

ROD RUSSEAU: So, yeah, those types of things, we just really tried to ramp up our monitoring and awareness of what was going on within the district infrastructure so that we weren't caught by focusing all of our attention now on supporting remote learning when somebody was getting handed the district level that we really aware of.

KAREN WETZEL: You know, it really sounds like having all of these processes in place, having a technology-forward perspective—I've done a lot of work with digital transformation—

ROD RUSSEAU: Sure.

KAREN WETZEL: —and whatever that might mean to individuals, everybody uses it slightly different, but having that approach of understanding the importance of this throughout, it sounds like you guys were in a fairly good place and probably a lot better prepared than some—you know, and so well done.

ROD RUSSEAU: Yeah.

KAREN WETZEL: And having those—

ROD RUSSEAU: It was still crazy. I mean, man, we had—

KAREN WETZEL: Oh, sure.

ROD RUSSEAU: We had administrative team meetings every day for months and months and months, where whatever there was a new crisis/opportunity every day to solve, you know.

[Laughter.]

ROD RUSSEAU: Crazy, crazy time for sure.

KAREN WETZEL: Well, it sounds like you came out of it pretty well.

ROD RUSSEAU: Yeah.

KAREN WETZEL: So, for someone who is looking to enter the field of cybersecurity, in these interviews, we really are trying to highlight the broad variety of careers one can go into, the broad variety of sectors. Obviously, for K-12, what would you suggest to someone who is maybe thinking about moving into this area?

ROD RUSSEAU: Yeah. You know, one, I—and this probably is universal, Karen, but I'll say it anyway—is find a mentor. Find someone who is doing what you think you might want to do or who knows what you think you might want to know. Befriend them. Understand what they're doing. Just kind of develop, again, those relationships, I think, are just so, so key.

And as you start to meet people and get engaged with people, say yes to opportunities, just the reason that I'm here today.

KAREN WETZEL: Yes.

ROD RUSSEAU: You know, this opportunity presented itself. Sure, sure, I'll do that. And, you know, yes, sometimes is it risky? Sometimes, you know, you may be a little unsure of yourself, but keep saying yes.

And I think especially for those people in tech leadership in the education space, CoSN is just, again—just a prompt for CoSN. For a technology leader in education that I've been in for many years, I went to numerous conferences over my career, and many of the conferences are—if they're educational conferences, they're 97 percent focused on teachers, which makes sense. That's what educational institutions do is teach and learn, and if I would go to a more technical conference like, let's say, a security conference or whatever, it would be more focused on the security like the CISOs at Boeing or super, super high tech.

When I went to my first CoSN conference many year ago, it's like the angels were singing. I went to the mothership. It's like these were all of my people talking about my things. So I think as a tech leader, if you're not involved with CoSN, it's the place to be in terms of getting the workshops that you need, getting the resources you need, connecting with the people you need that are doing the things that you're going and having the problems and solving the problems that you need to solve.

And, again, just a little plug for FRSecure and SecurityStudios, CISSP mentor program, again, completely free, no strings attached, and just, you know, again, a 6-, 8-week program that really goes through every element of what somebody knows, what they need to know for the

CISSP, and not even close the amount of overall time in learning that you need to spend. But it's a great—it's a great way to kind of immerse yourself into those concepts.

But I would say, you know, again, just connecting with people, whether it's through CoSN or somebody in another school district that is doing some things that you're interested in learning more about, that's probably a great first step.

KAREN WETZEL: Well, and you've shared some great places for people to start and to help with those connections, so thank you for that.

ROD RUSSEAU: Sure.

KAREN WETZEL: And thank you too, Rod, for your time today. This has been fascinating, and I'm sure that the folks when they hear this interview are going to be equally fascinated. I very much appreciated getting to know more about you.

ROD RUSSEAU: Well, thank you, Karen, and again, I really appreciate the opportunity and have enjoyed talking with you.

KAREN WETZEL: Great. Thanks.

[End of recorded session.]