CISCO SYSTEMS

Charles County Public Schools
Using Community Support—and Technology—to Break Away from the Pack

Like many school districts across the U.S., Charles County Public Schools (CCPS) has its share of challenges—budget cuts, a fast-growing population, limited space, and more. But unlike other districts, CCPS has found that the solutions to these problems come from working in partnership with their local government—and with business partners who share their vision.

"Our mission is to provide a world-class education for all of our students, to educate them to their full potential, and to challenge them in ways they've never been challenged before," says James Richmond, superintendent of Charles County Public Schools. "And to accomplish this, we need to work with people who understand us and are committed to the same goals." This year, CCPS took solid steps toward achieving their objectives by joining forces with the Charles County Commissioners' Office—and by becoming the first Cisco Breakaway Schools district.

"Schools aren't islands," adds Richmond. "They can't exist by themselves, and I think that's what the mistake is in society. What we deem as failures of schools today occur because the community's not involved. You need to get involved in the total process, you need to question, you need to challenge, and you need to set standards. And that is what I ask of the business industry."

Challenges

Charles County is located some 25 miles south of Washington D.C., with the county seat in La Plata, Maryland. The district is made up of:

- 19 elementary schools
- 7 middle schools
- 5 high schools
- 1,703 certificated employees
- 25,000 students

Recently, the county experienced a tremendous population upswing and a change in demographics. "The Washington area started to explode and growth was seeping down here," explains Murray Levy, president of the Charles County Board of Commissioners. As the number of students in the district increased by 800-900 per year, overall student test scores declined. "We ranked 19th or 20th out of 24 counties

in all testing areas," notes Dr. John Cox, assistant superintendent for instruction. "That, frankly, was embarrassing. We weren't getting to the children and we didn't have an instructional organization, so we had to do major surgery."

Decisions

CCPS determined that its curriculum needed to be revamped, its teaching methods improved, and that every student should be taught, leaving no student out. Their efforts paid off—in 2002, the district's SAT scores improved to number 3 in the state. When Maryland began installing a fiber optic cable system, CCPS saw an opportunity to move to the next level by connecting to this network and upgrading the technology in its schools.

District officials began searching for a technology company to build an infrastructure that would meet their school equity, curriculum, security, and productivity goals. In addition, CCPS was solidifying plans for a new high school that included a state-of-the-art science, career, and technology center, scheduled to open in September '05. Already an award-winning Cisco Networking Academy, CCPS was familiar with Cisco and its commitment to education, and decided to approach the company with their plans. "We explored all avenues, and what separated Cisco from the pack was that it integrated voice, video, and data the best," recalls Cox.

After months of working with Cisco on the proposal, the district presented it to the County Commissioners' Office, who approved it immediately. "We had a very tight budget, we were out of money, and we felt like we were stretched as thin as we could be, but the second we saw this, we all agreed there are some things just worth taking risks for," adds Levy.

Having enlisted the support of their local government, CCPS became the nation's first Cisco Breakaway Schools district. This designation signified a partnership between the district and Cisco that focused on "breaking away" from traditional methods and meeting the challenges of education in the 21st century. "To us, being a Breakaway Schools district means that we're not in a box or tied to the status quo and mediocre success," explains Cox. "When we go on this journey with our county government and Cisco, we know that this is about our kids, and that we have an opportunity to break the traditional procedures to provide better programs for them."

Solutions

Cisco and the district began to connect all the Charles County schools with a single converged network infrastructure. "We want one system that's seamless, so we can bring up whatever it is we need, at our fingertips," says Richmond. Once the entire district has been retrofitted, this new network will support:

- **An equally high level of technology for all schools,** so that no school is left behind.
- **Digital video,** which enables classroom-to-classroom collaboration, improved curriculum, enhanced teacher training, access to subject matter experts, and more. "We want to have interactive video because we have courses we want to offer, but we don't have enough student enrollment to offer them," explains Cox. "This will allow us to have a course at one site going to another site on an interactive basis."
- **IP phones** installed in every classroom, for improved parent/teacher and teacher/office communications as well as 911 emergency service. "Our teachers are very excited about IP telephony because it creates a very sophisticated telephone that gives them the capability to do managerial duties in an expedited way," notes Cox. These duties are performed with a phone application that enables teachers to take attendance, look up student information, locate students, and order supplies. It also improves district-wide productivity by allowing

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staff to report time in and out, look up medical information, locate teachers and students, broadcast emergency messages, and send auto emails to parents.

- **Physical, campus, and network security,** through systems that run video surveillance equipment over the network and protect confidential data from hackers and intruders.
- **Wireless capabilities,** enabling data to be accessed remotely and conveniently, such as through mobile computer labs.

Outlook

How do district administrators and government officials see the future for CCPS? "Our upgraded campuses will make things easier for our staff, students, and parents," exclaims Kathy Levanduski, chairman of the Charles County Board of Education. "Under the new 'No Child Left Behind' legislation, we need to make data accessible to more people, and our new technology will help us do that. It will improve our communications to parents, students, and teachers. It will provide advanced digital video that will enhance our curriculum, enable professional development for teachers and staff, and facilitate videoconferencing for district-wide meetings without travel. And it will allow us to offer more AP courses. We're very excited about it."

Cox shares this optimistic vision. "The future for Charles County Public Schools will be one of continued drive and attention to make things better in the context of administrative and instructional issues. This is a golden opportunity. It's great that the county government, the Board of Ed, the community, the work force, our parents, and our students are all in on this excitement. It's not just ours. It's everyone's."

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