



INDUSTRY

Lakota Local School District (LLSD) is a growing suburban school district outside of Cincinnati, Ohio. Lakota has been named among the high performing school districts and rated “Excellent” by the state of Ohio. Made up of 23 buildings spread out geographically across 46 square miles, the LLSD currently supports approximately 17,000 students and 2,300 faculty and staff and expects to grow by about six to eight hundred students per year over the next several years.

The district has two IT professionals responsible for network and systems administration, Todd Wesley, network and systems manager for the Lakota Local School District, manages this department and oversees one network administrator. All the systems implemented are implemented on a district-wide basis. Lakota school district is running all the network gear, with a district budget of about 120 million annually with two people on the network and systems side.

CommuniGate Pro at Lakota Local School District— Providing a Solid Foundation for the Messaging Infrastructure

CHALLENGE

Prior to choosing CommuniGate Pro to support messaging services approximately 3 years ago, LLSD had been reliant upon an ISP for email functionality. LLSD soon realized that building an email system in-house was optimal because of constraints and limitations of using an ISP to provide these services and the decision was made to replace this system.

“We had little ability to build upon it, little ability to manage anything in a way that our users needed and really what we needed to be able to deliver,” says Todd Wesley, senior systems administrator at LLSD.

In evaluating email solutions, it quickly became apparent that LLSD needed a solution that could provide optimal total cost of ownership (TCO), was easy to maintain, was multi-platform and would provide a solid foundation for the messaging infrastructure to accommodate expected future growth and user needs. The decision came down to Microsoft Exchange versus CommuniGate Systems’ CommuniGate Pro.

SOLUTION

After learning about CommuniGate Systems in several trade publications, Wesley and his team made the decision to implement CommuniGate Pro because it offered lower TCO, was easy to maintain, and could run on several platforms. While the district is primarily a “MAC shop”, it was important that the solution be platform agnostic in order to accommodate future growth and allow LLSD the flexibility to migrate to and/or incorporate additional platforms in the future. Wesley says, “Presently, we are running

on MAC OSX, and have been fairly pleased. But it doesn't mean that in a year, or two years, or even five years, that we will continue with this particular platform. It's great to know we can jump to another platform with minimal growing pains."

LLSD has also taken advantage of upgrades, including adding Groupware functionality which it plans to continue to leverage as the deployment expands and develops. They expect that the addition of Groupware will have extensive, positive effects on district wide communications and scheduling as these features are rolled out.

LLSD was able to leverage existing Microsoft Outlook licenses with the addition of the MAPI connector. To test the functionality, LLSD rolled out a pilot program of the MAPI connector. The pilot program was implemented in 2003 for a period of two to three months. Wesley discussed the evolution of the technology from an end user perspective, "From the beginning of the pilot to the end of the pilot they basically had all of our needs covered." LLSD also uses the Radius Authentication features offered for district-wide user authentication needs.

BENEFITS

CommuniGate Pro with Groupware has allowed LLSD to meet its objectives for implementing an internal email messaging solution. LLSD has realized lower TCO, minimal maintenance needs, increased flexibility and the customer support services they had expected from the solution. "As we began to implement it, it required a lot of initial planning but once we flipped the switch, everything was great," says Wesley. "As in any education establishment, we are limited in staff and our responsibility list far outweighs our staff list so it's tremendous to have a product where we can work with the vendor and really answer the questions as they arise with the strong resources that they offer."

In addition, CommuniGate Pro with Groupware has proven to be a solid foundation for providing added features to users which directly meet specific needs of the educational environment.

FERPA

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal mandate that restricts the dissemination of any student information electronically and/or without parental consent. As a result, school districts have been mandated to put processes in place to gather and track parental consent to achieve compliance and protect student privacy.

Leveraging the existing features of CommuniGate Pro, Wesley has developed a means for parents to access the consent forms, drafted by district legal advisors, via the LLSD Web site at the click of a button. Parents can then paste the consent forms into an email and send the email, with consent required by FERPA to the appropriate school. The process has enabled schools within the district to more easily track and gather parental consent forms and as a fringe benefit, has allowed school administrators to easily gather a database of the parents email addresses for future communications. The email consent button has become a model for other school districts that are "in shock and awe" that LLSD was able to accomplish this. LLSD is pleased that they have been able to add this valuable service to the district using the list features of the out-of-the-box product, and that it was accomplished with minimal time and effort.

FERPA also mandates that the schools protect and limit staff members' knowledge of student medical or special needs services to only those staff who are immediately concerned and working directly with that student. Wesley explains, "When you have certain meetings scheduled, even as simple as a meeting with Mrs. Smith and little Timmy and health related, whether it's special services or nursing, it cannot be published for public or even staff eyes to see, only those approved by the law are allowed to see it."

Using the shared folders functionality of CommuniGate Pro and the calendaring features, Wesley and his team have been able to set up department-specific calendars and shared folders. Departments can easily administer these features themselves, protecting student privacy and helping to enforce FERPA compliance. "The user is able to regulate who can see such emails with shared folders as well as regulate and share certain calendars with each other," says Wesley. "This is a huge step forward and the regulation is put into the hands of the department, which is unheard of these days."



TEACHER
WEB SITES

The CommuniGate Pro solution has been instrumental in enabling LLSD to offer value-added services to its faculty with minimal effort and no additional IT expenditures. Through the functionality provided by the solution, LLSD can offer secure and reliable Web space to teachers so that they can easily communicate with parents and students. Prior to implementing the CommuniGate Pro supported teacher Web pages, teachers were using an off-site service which presented challenges for LLSD in terms of compliance and security.

Now, with CommuniGate Pro, establishing Web space, directly linked from the Lakota School District Web site is as easy as setting up an email address. Further, teachers are able to perform much of the administration themselves, saving the IT department time and money.

DEPARTMENTAL
CALENDARING
AND SCHEDULING

Because the school district is geographically expansive, the calendaring and scheduling features of CommuniGate Pro with Groupware have been instrumental in streamlining and improving district-wide communications. CommuniGate Pro's multi-platform capabilities have allowed faculty and staff to seamlessly communicate via email, calendaring and scheduling, regardless of what operating system they are using on the desktop or where their building is located, enabling the district to leverage existing resources with optimal interoperability.

LLSD is also currently running a pilot program for departmental calendaring, shared contacts and task lists to streamline workflow and improve communications within the district.

FUTURE PLANS
AND DIRECTION

As the district grows, Wesley and LLSD plan to continue to build upon the proven success of CommuniGate Pro and take advantage of new SIP-based features such as video conferencing and telephony, all integrated into messaging.

Wesley says, "Our network infrastructure has been built up over the past few years to fully support any of that and at this point we've reached a plateau where we just want to start leveraging these resources in addition to building the infrastructure out."

"There are many products out there that do everything we have talked about. But, there isn't one product that does it all until now," Wesley explains. "From a budgetary perspective, we couldn't afford it if we had to assemble each feature individually from different packages. CommuniGate Pro has been a great solution on many levels."



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