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Online Meetings Spark New Opportunities for Schools

The Anoka-Hennepin School District uses web-based tools to help teachers share information and enhance instruction.

Executive Summary

Customer Name:
Anoka-Hennepin School District

Industry:
Education

Location:
Anoka, MN

Number of Employees:
Over 5000

Challenge:
- Increase opportunities for teacher cooperation and communication
- Offer robust interactive meeting experiences for multisite educators
- Support rapid exchange of ideas with collaborative document creation and sharing

Solution:
- Online meeting tools enable regular teaching strategy sessions
- Web-based conferences engage students through interactive education experiences
- Online tools allow access from multiple classrooms

Results:
- Reduced travel costs while improving staff efficiency and productivity
- Increased frequency of planning and review meetings from biannually to weekly
- Improved peer support for specialized teachers

Challenge

The Anoka-Hennepin School District serves approximately 40,500 students living near the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul in Minnesota. The largest school district in the state, Anoka-Hennepin operates more than 50 schools and alternative education sites in the area and offers other services, such as adult education programs, to the community's 248,000 residents.

A leader in innovative education, Anoka-Hennepin strives to find new methods to enrich classes and provide students with unique learning opportunities. For Tom Skoglund, an Anoka-Hennepin teacher on special assignment as an instructional technology facilitator, discovering ways to engage students through technology has evolved into a full-time job. "We really focus on integrating technology and instruction in classrooms at all of the educational sites in the district," he says.

After listening to teachers describe problems they had communicating with educators at other schools, Skoglund realized his colleagues were looking for a tool that they could use to share information with each other. "We have teams of teachers that collaborate in groups called professional learning communities, or PLCs, and it became apparent that we needed to bring teachers in PLCs together, even if they were located around the district," he says. "There was a real need for live, face-to-face communication." Skoglund began looking for a solution that would enable Anoka-Hennepin teachers to collaborate online and facilitate interactions between classrooms at different sites.

Solution

In the past, educators at the Anoka-Hennepin School District experimented with several online collaboration tools, including CU-SeeMe and Skype, but those solutions did not offer the range of features that teachers needed, and staff often encountered problems with connectivity. "We needed the ability to share presentations and collaborate on the creation of documents in real time," Skogland says. "We also needed the ability to connect teachers from at least five different sites, and the performance of the other tools that we tried just left so much to be desired that we backed away from online meeting technology altogether."

After Anoka-Hennepin received a federal Enhancing Education Through Technology (E2T2) grant in early 2009, Skoglund and his team decided to implement new online meeting technology and selected Cisco WebEx™ solutions. "We had a long standing relationship with Cisco as our network provider, so we asked some questions about possible solutions, and they suggested WebEx right away," Skoglund says. "We saw some WebEx demonstrations and we were very impressed. We had a really positive experience with all of the features that we saw and tried."

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The document-sharing and video capabilities that WebEx® offers improved how Anoka-Hennepin teachers communicate, enabling them to share worksheets, class presentations, and other materials in real time. "Before using WebEx, we tried setting up dedicated websites for teachers working in PLCs, but it still didn't take care of the need for real interaction," Skoglund says. "With WebEx, we have a valuable tool that helps teachers meet face-to-face with colleagues in different buildings so they can share strategies." For specialized teachers who are the only educators teaching a particular subject at their school, Cisco® WebEx has had a unique impact. "These teachers often feel that they don't have access to the same level of peer support that other teachers have," he says. "WebEx connects them with other specialized instructors at other schools, helping them feel like they're not alone in dealing with the unique challenges they face."

Anoka-Hennepin educators are also using WebEx to develop new, highly interactive educational opportunities, including a live conference between students and a published author at one of the district's middle schools. "Students and staff at Oakview Middle School had read Janet Taylor Lisle's book *Black Duck*, and we thought it would be nice to connect with the author via email and see if she would respond to a few questions," Skoglund says. "But WebEx gave us the opportunity to connect four classrooms to the author at her home, and the students were able to ask live questions while she gave live feedback." The session was also broadcast through the school's internal TV system, giving over 1000 students the opportunity to participate in the conference.

Skoglund points out that the book event was very successful for everyone involved. "The students were excited about it, and the author had a great experience. She told us that she had never participated in a video conference before, but the setup was easy and she was able to relax and really enjoy talking to the students," he says.

> "WebEx allows us to accomplish more with fewer resources. The cost savings for us are particularly critical when our budgets are tight."
>
> **— Tom Skoglund, instructional technology facilitator, Anoka-Hennepin School District**

Results

WebEx solutions have transformed the way that Anoka-Hennepin teachers interact, increasing the level of collaboration in professional learning communities and helping educators continuously improve their instructional methods. "Before WebEx, teachers working in different locations would meet maybe twice a year," Skoglund says. "Now, they can meet once a week to share information. With WebEx, you don't have to wait to share ideas. You can share them at any time."

WebEx has also made it easier for Skoglund and his team to train teachers and troubleshoot technology issues for educators across the district. "I get a lot of questions about how to update or maintain classroom websites," he says. "Instead of having to describe what to do on the phone, we can use WebEx to share screens, and I can walk teachers through the process when we're both looking at the same thing. We also use WebEx for staff development, so instead of having to travel from building to building to train people individually, I can train five or six people at the same time in an online meeting."

In addition to helping Skoglund's team save time and reduce costs, WebEx solutions have also allowed other teachers and administrators in the district to cut their travel expenses while increasing their productivity. "WebEx makes it possible for teachers in PLCs to meet teachers at other schools face-to-face. If we weren't using WebEx, the time and cost constraints just wouldn't allow them to travel," Skoglund says. "WebEx allows us to accomplish more with fewer resources. The cost savings for us are particularly critical when our budgets are tight."

Next Steps

The Anoka-Hennepin School District plans to expand the use WebEx in a number of ways, utilizing the solution for offsite parent-teacher conferences and delivering instruction to students who may not be able to leave their homes. Educators also hope to use WebEx to offer more live conferences with authors, politicians, and successful alumni who work in a variety of interesting fields. "We want to bring them back to the classroom through WebEx conferences," Skoglund says. "We can use WebEx to tap into those experts and show students where they can go from here."

For More Information

- To find out more about Cisco WebEx, go to: http://www.cisco.com/go/webex

- To read other collaboration case studies, go to: http://www.cisco.com/go/customers

- To provide feedback or participate in the WebEx customer reference program, email: real.results@webex.com

Product List

Cisco WebEx