

School System Transforms Educational Experience with Video

Customer Case Study



Mobile County schools use Cisco live and pre-recorded video content solutions to engage students and enhance learning.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Customer Name: Mobile County Public School System

Industry: Education

Location: Mobile, Alabama

Number of Employees: 8500

Challenge:

- Provide robust instruction to students dispersed across large geographical area
- Maximize limited faculty and staff resources across Mobile County and state
- Implement comprehensive video suite to improve video literacy and engage students

Solution:

- Cisco Digital Signs keep parents and students informed and spark incidental learning
- Cisco TelePresence enables teachers and homebound students to interact in live lessons
- Cisco MXE, TelePresence Content Servers, and Digital Media Encoder transcode and share live and recorded video

Results:

- Enhanced learning by engaging students with live and pre-recorded video in and outside of classroom
- Improved faculty communication and enabled interactive instruction for homebound and distance students
- Increased parental involvement in school system and educational process

Challenge

The Mobile County Public School System (MCPSS) serves more than 63,000 students located in the southwest corner of Alabama near the city of Mobile. Covering 1200 square miles, MCPSS is the largest public school system in the state and operates more than 100 schools and facilities across the county.

MCPSS faculty and staff are responsible for educating a diverse student body in a range of locations, from Mobile, the state's third largest city, to small, more rural towns. That diversity creates a rich cultural environment, but also presents obstacles to allocating resources effectively. "We're charged with educating every child in Mobile County, but because we're so geographically spread out, it can be difficult to reach students with the instruction they need," says David Akridge, executive manager of information technology at MCPSS.

Akridge and his team are always looking to find technology solutions to enhance learning, but they noticed a shift in student attitudes that pointed them in a clear direction. "As we began to look at new technologies to implement in the schools, we saw students becoming more and more interested in video," says Akridge. "Filmmaker George Lucas has said that video is the newest language that students must be able to understand, and we agree 100 percent. To prepare our students for the future, we knew we had to make video a centerpiece of our strategy."

Utilizing the government-sponsored eRate program, which allows schools and libraries to purchase telecommunications and Internet service and solutions at discounted rates, MCPSS sought to achieve the dual goals of reaching every student across the system regardless of location while improving video literacy. In 2007, the school system began developing a comprehensive plan to provision a complete suite of leading video solutions that were not only powerful, but also extremely easy to use.



“At MCPSS, video isn’t just used to show people information. It’s a fundamental part of how we educate now, and it’s helping us give students the most enriching education possible.”

David Akridge
Executive Manager of Information Technology
Mobile County Public School System

Solution

At the start of the evaluation process, the MCPSS technology team turned to Information Transport Solutions, Inc. (ITS), a southeastern technology integrator and longtime Cisco partner, for guidance. “MCPSS originally came to us to increase network performance and bandwidth by deploying Cisco routers and switches,” says Henry Zeigler, account manager at ITS. “Then the school system created a five-year plan to layer additional technology, including video solutions, on top of the optimized network. Cisco makes best-of-breed equipment, and ITS provides best-of-breed integration and support, so we were confident we would be able to make the planned large-scale video deployment a reality.”

Extending the Classroom Through Cisco Digital Signs

The first step in the video plan was to deploy 15 Cisco® Digital Signs in school lobbies. “We wanted a way to reach parents that was more effective than sending a bulletin on a piece of paper, so using video in the schools where parents would see it seemed like an ideal solution,” Akridge says. “We started putting announcements on the Cisco Digital Signs, and once staff saw how effective they were, they wanted them in all of the classrooms. We now have digital signs in one or more areas of every school. Some of those areas include the classroom, cafeteria, and library, and schools use them to quiz students on vocabulary and math equations.” Today, MCPSS uses more than 180 Cisco Digital Signs, a twelve-fold increase since 2007.

Cisco Digital Signs are also part of the MCPSS emergency communications strategy. “Changes in weather often come up quickly and unannounced,” says Akridge, “so we use Cisco Digital Signs to instantly broadcast emergency communications and severe weather alerts throughout the school district.”

Reaching Students and Teachers Anywhere in the County with Cisco TelePresence

Given that expanding access to education was a critical part of the MCPSS plan, the team also deployed Cisco TelePresence® and Cisco Jabber™ Video for TelePresence. “We serve a large population of homebound students, children who, due to illness or disability, can’t make it to school every day,” says Akridge. “We have a limited number of teachers to reach those students, so TelePresence is perfect for homebound education. Our instructors present lessons using TelePresence, and students can interact with them using Jabber on their laptops, whether they’re at home or even at the hospital. TelePresence gives homebound students all of the benefits of live instruction and helps ensure that they don’t fall behind in their studies.”

Outside of teaching, MCPSS also uses Cisco TelePresence to streamline communication and reduce travel within the district. For example, principals can now have weekly status meetings with district officials or superintendents without having to leave their school. MCPSS IT can also utilize Cisco TelePresence to provide remote technical support throughout the district without driving to each individual’s school location.

In addition, Cisco TelePresence extends student and parent access to the school system’s limited number of counselors. “Because MCPSS doesn’t have a large group of counselors, each counselor has to serve two or three schools, which can make availability difficult,” says Tracye Mathis, web telecommunications manager at MCPSS. “With Cisco TelePresence, we’re able to bring the parent, student, teacher, and counselor together without having them in the same room. They accomplish everything they would as if they were in a face-to-face meeting.”

Helping Students and Teachers Share Video Easily with Cisco Solutions

MCPSS wanted to empower teachers and students to create and share video quickly and easily. To accomplish this, the technology team implemented a variety of Cisco products, including Cisco TelePresence Content Server, Cisco Digital Media Encoders, and SMART Boards. The school district is currently exploring the use of the Cisco Media Experience Engine (MXE) as well.

“Originally, we used the Digital Media Encoder to broadcast live events, like graduations, but now students use it every day to create videos for morning announcements,” Akridge says. “Using MXE, we plan to convert the files to share on the digital signs or in-classroom SMART Boards. Together with the TelePresence Content Server, this technology will enable us to capture video in any format and transcode it into formats viewable on any device, whether that be an iPhone, iPad, or Android device, helping create more options and opportunities for students, teachers, and administrative staff to use video.”

The ability to capture, transform, and share live and pre-recorded video at MCPSS has increased parental involvement as well, a key factor in boosting student success. “We use Cisco video to keep parents up to date on everything from severe weather alerts, to what their children learned during their last field trip, and more,” Akridge says. “It’s a great way to keep families, teachers, and administrators across the district connected and engaged.”

Results

By deploying a comprehensive suite of Cisco video solutions, MCPSS has transformed the public school experience in Mobile County, as well as the state as a whole, for students, parents, and staff alike. “Students are naturally drawn to video, and it keeps them engaged in a fun, exciting way that maximizes learning,” says Akridge. “At MCPSS, video isn’t just used to show people information. It’s a fundamental part of how we educate now, and it’s helping us give students the most enriching education possible.”

As a prime example of this broad shift in teaching, Zeigler points to expanded access to Advanced Placement (AP) classes. “Our governor started a program to enable every public school student equal access to AP classes, like Mandarin Chinese. The problem is that there are very few foreign language teachers in the state, so how can students in rural parts of Alabama take the AP Chinese or Spanish class?” he asks. “Fortunately, Mobile County Public School System has a very talented Mandarin Chinese instructor, who teaches classes live via TelePresence. With video, she may be teaching in one location, but she’s reaching students wherever they happen to be, even outside the county, and whenever they have time to watch.”

Thanks to the Cisco TelePresence Content Server and MXE, MCPSS can also take advantage of lecture capture, or the ability to record these live Mandarin lessons and make them available for anytime playback. With advanced teaching and learning capabilities such as these, MCPSS is well-positioned for continued student success ahead. “Cisco has helped us make tremendous leaps forward in educating our students for the 21st century,” says Akridge. “We are now prepared for the classroom of tomorrow by giving students all they need to do their best.”

Next Steps

Going forward, MCPSS plans to make video even more prevalent across all schools and other facilities. In fact, the technology team has already begun to deploy its next video-enabled solution, the Cisco IP Video Phone E20. "We plan to continue working with Cisco to adapt to the new language of video," says Akridge. "Whether through live or recorded material, video will be key in allowing us to engage, share, and learn at MPCSS."

Product List

- Cisco Digital Media Suite
 - Cisco Cast
 - Cisco Digital Media Encoder
 - Cisco Digital Signs
- Cisco IP Video Phone E20
- Cisco Jabber Video for TelePresence (Movi)
- Cisco Media Experience Engine
- Cisco TelePresence
- Cisco TelePresence Content Server
- SMART Boards

For More Information

To find out more about Cisco Business Video solutions, visit:
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