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Classroom Instruction: Distributing software from a single district server saves time--and money

March 1, 2006—Ten years ago, the Vineland, N.J., Public Schools and the City of Vineland embraced a daunting challenge: Create a comprehensive telecommunications network that could be shared by all city organizations. This challenge led to the installation of 28 miles of fiber-optic cable and a Metropolitan Area Network (MAN) that today provides Gigabit Ethernet connectivity to all of the city's schools.

This ultra high-speed MAN supports virtually every aspect of the school system's operations--from electronic grading and attendance, to digital security cameras that monitor high school activity, to streaming video and videoconferencing. One of the many added benefits of this high-speed connectivity has been our ability to consolidate instructional resources and distribute them district-wide from a single, central location.

A primary example is our use of SuccessMaker Enterprise software from Pearson Digital Learning. By consolidating all of our licenses onto a single, central server, we've saved time and money by simplifying our software installation, upkeep, and reporting. And we've also saved money by buying only as many licenses as we truly need.

A typical deployment of the SuccessMaker client/server solution involves a server installed in a classroom lab setting with 20 to 30 client workstations running from that server. That's how we initially deployed the solution ourselves: in isolated lab scenarios, with one server hosting 20 to 30 computers in each lab.

These lab setups were located throughout the district, for a total of seven computers labs with seven servers--each requiring its own separate administration. In addition, student and school data were isolated on each server, and data analysis would require the compilation of data from all seven servers to analyze district trends. Even worse, the SuccessMaker program was confined to these computer labs and thus was not equally distributed throughout the district. Only one of our four middle schools, and four of our seven elementary schools, had such a lab.

To solve these problems, we decided to consolidate all of our licenses onto a single server that resides at the district's NOC (Network Operation Center). Distributed access to the SuccessMaker software means the application is not limited to individual labs, but instead can be accessed through any of the district's 5,000

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computers. The ability to use the program from anywhere on our network eliminates scheduling difficulties, opens up access to students in those schools without computer labs, and offers tremendous flexibility for teachers.

District studies found that all students in grades 2-10 could benefit from using the program. But at \$1,000 per license, how were we to provide access to all 6,000-plus students in these grades? Again, our model of distribution from a single, central server provided an answer: We would buy only as many concurrent licenses as we thought we'd need. We settled on 250, meaning only 250 students can use the software at any given time.

Because our high school students start their day at 7:30 a.m., they begin their use of the SuccessMaker program early in the day. Middle school students use the program later in the morning and also after school, when server use is minimal. Elementary students arrive at school after 9:00 a.m. and use the program throughout the day. As soon as a student logs off, his or her license is released to a new user. In all the time we've been employing this solution, we've only had one problem with access--and that was quickly resolved.

It's important to note that our robust network infrastructure allows us to employ such a model. Because the SuccessMaker program relies heavily on graphics, ample network transmission speeds are essential--figure 1.5 Mbps of bandwidth (or the equivalent of a T-1 line) for each client machine operating the software. With a Gigabit Ethernet network, we have plenty of bandwidth for 250 students to be using the software from a single server at the same time.

Sharing certainly has paid off in Vineland; by sharing costs, the city and the district were able to construct a robust, fiber-optic MAN that serves all our needs, and by sharing licenses, we can deliver instructional software to all students at a fraction of the cost of a traditional lab deployment. The fruits of Vineland's labor? We've increased productivity and student achievement, while reducing costs and network maintenance.

Stephen L. Dantinne is supervisor of technology for the Vineland Public Schools.



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