Morgan County Charter School System Goes Wireless

To support its 1-to-1 and BYOD initiative, Morgan County Charter School System needed a high-density wireless network that could support thousands of devices simultaneously. Here's what it did.

Just 55 miles from Atlanta, Georgia's Morgan County has a population of about 15,500 sprinkled in and around Madison, Buckhead, Bostwick, and Rutledge. The Morgan County Charter School System serves approximately 3,300 students across five campuses. There is also the Morgan County CrossRoads School for students in grades 6 to 12 who need an alternative form of instructional delivery. The district has a long history in education, with buildings that can be traced back to agricultural and mechanical schools in the early 20th century.

Two years ago, the Morgan County district wanted to implement a 1-to-1 program beginning with 600 netbooks and a BYOD initiative. But officials there knew they faced a problem. "We had basic wireless coverage everywhere on all five of our campuses," says Jay Cawley, technology director for Morgan County Charter School System, "but we knew it did not provide the high-density coverage that we needed for our initiative."

Cawley and his staff began evaluating other systems. They wanted a wireless solution that would support all of the devices they knew students would bring to school, from notebooks to iPads to iPods and smartphones.

"Students today expect to be able to connect wirelessly everywhere," says Cawley, "whether they're using their iPods, smartphones, Android tablets, or laptops. We encourage students to bring whatever device they want into the classroom, as long as they have permission from the classroom teacher."

The district had a traditional wired network for all of the computers in the classrooms and computer labs, so they had a pretty good idea of what they were looking for. "We had three primary objectives," Cawley explains. "We wanted a wireless system that was as reliable as our wired network, one that could provide increased user density and capacity, and a network that would give us superior security."

They got all three with their new Xirrus Wireless Array. "Today, the Xirrus network is capable of providing secure wireless connectivity to more than 4,000 devices for students and teachers across our five campuses," says Cawley. To help the district determine its precise needs, Xirrus did an active site survey of all locations. "It was fabulous working directly with a Xirrus engineer to do the site survey and install the equipment. They also did a post-site survey to determine that the coverage was what was expected from the initial site survey," Cawley adds, noting that no deviations were found.

According to Cawley, one of the advantages of the Xirrus Array platform is that there is no need for an access point in every classroom. Xirrus uses a system that integrated multiple access points per Array. In fact, each Array has two, four, eight, 12, or 16 access points per device, and can therefore replace four or more access points.

"With other systems we looked at, we needed one Array per classroom for the number of devices we wanted to support," Cawley said. "In the traditional individual Array scenario, you have to run a network drop to each radio, whereas with Xirrus you only run one drop to each Array instead of one to each access point. With Xirrus, we only need an Array of radios placed at intervals throughout the school."

The price was another advantage. "The cost of deployment was less than comparable deployment with other systems," Cawley says.

"The two biggest victories for me," Cawley says, "were getting coverage in areas that we didn't initially anticipate, and the ease and convenience of the Xirrus Management System. We use XMS as our primary management interface, and it has helped tremendously in terms of being able to monitor the network. I also use the XMS to push out new firmware to the Arrays and to change policies and SSIDs on the network as necessary. In fact, we haven't had to worry about the network since deploying Xirrus. It's been one of those systems that we put in place and it just worked."

If you are interested in deploying a high performance Wi-Fi solution, please contact Xirrus at: info@xirrus.com.

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