



▶ Electronic Curriculum

With Emtec's help, Southern Regional School District enhances education through upgraded e-mail platform.

It has been said that while most teachers teach, great teachers inspire. The Southern Regional School District in Manahawkin, N.J., strongly believes that technology can be used to inspire students in ways that traditional teaching methods alone cannot.

"We're very progressive here with our technology," said Tim Daly, network manager for the district, which serves approximately 4,000 students in grades 7-12. "We understand that technology can enrich and improve the educational experience."

E-mail is one digital tool that the district has embraced as an integral part of teaching and learning. Southern Regional is among a growing number of school districts that have chosen to provide students, faculty and staff with their own e-mail accounts. This opens up a whole new world of educational opportunities by allowing students to exchange information, conduct research, discuss assignments and ask their teachers questions after the school day is over.

Recently, however, the district concluded that its existing messaging infrastructure had too many limitations to adequately serve its growing needs. Just as all students are taught early on that it is OK to ask for help, Southern Regional didn't hesitate to seek outside guidance on how to best upgrade the system. When evaluating technology vendors to provide assistance, Emtec, Inc., stood at the head of the class.

"As much as we like to do most of our technology work with our in-house staff, there are some projects where you need some outside engineering expertise," said Daly. "That's why we decided to have Emtec give us a hand with this upgrade. We wanted to make sure that it was done correctly and that we didn't get off on the wrong foot."

The Right Credentials:

As a contract vendor for the state of New Jersey, Emtec is among a handful of approved solutions providers eligible to provide IT-related services to school districts as well as a variety of state, county and local government agencies. With its extensive Microsoft certifications, Emtec was also well positioned to help Southern Regional make the transition from its existing messaging system to a Microsoft Outlook platform. Emtec Systems Engineer Dante Lellos worked closely with Daly and his staff to develop a plan for a seamless migration path. It was essential that the change be made in a way that would be completely transparent to students, faculty and staff using the existing messaging system.

Since the school district was already running 2000 servers, it was quickly determined there was no need to conduct a "forklift" upgrade to Exchange 2003. Rather, Lellos suggested that the district could achieve its goal by retaining its existing servers and upgrading only the Active Directory domain controllers from 2000 to 2003.

Active Directory is the network directory services feature in Exchange that allows administrators to centrally manage users, clients, servers and other network components. Domain controllers are the centerpieces of Active Directory. They store user account information, authenticate users and enforce security policies for a Windows domain. Key to the performance of directory controllers are Flexible Single Master Operation (FSMO) roles, which are responsible for performing updates to the directory schema.

"They were running 2000 server with two domains, so we went in and installed four new 2003 domain controllers — two in each domain for redundancy," said Lellos. "Once the servers in each domain replicated and everything was running as planned, we then transferred the FSMO roles to the new 2003 domain controllers."

With all accounts and resources replicated to the new domain controllers, the two e-mail systems will run side by side until Daly and his staff perform a complete cutover in August, when school is out and few students and teachers will be using the system.

Taking Control:

When classes resume for the fall semester, Daly plans to extend e-mail services to all students in grades 9-12, up from about 70 percent at present. The key, he said, is that the Outlook platform gives the district far more control over the system and the ability to prevent abuse by student users.

"It will be much easier to manage the users," he said. "We'll be able to manage mailing lists centrally, and we can make specific permissions for our student users where we'll allow them only to send and receive e-mail with teachers and some select supervisors. They won't be able to receive mail from outside the system or from the Internet, and they won't be able to send mail out, so it will only be for educational purposes."

Daly said Lellos and Emtec deserve high marks for their work on the project. He said the suggestion to upgrade only the domain controllers rather than servers allowed the project to be completed at about half the cost of the original estimate. In addition, Lellos trained Daly's staff to administer the system during the project.

"Dante was simply excellent to work with," said Daly. "Not only was his skill level really high, but he was extremely reliable. He had a really long drive down here — I think it was three hours each way — but he'd stay here until 4 or 5 every afternoon until everything was squared away. There were times during the transition that I would think of something in the evening and send him an e-mail at 9 p.m., and I'd get an email response from him 10 minutes later."

"It was a very smooth project. There was no downtime for any of the users. Dante was very conscientious about the job. He was easy to get in touch with, he followed through on everything and made sure everything was working. Overall, working with Emtec was a really positive experience and definitely worth the investment for the district."

About Emtec: Established in 1964, Emtec, Inc. is a systems integrator that provides IT services and products to the federal, state, local, education and commercial markets. Our market leading value-based management methods, coupled with best-in-class IT technology, consulting and development services, address a wide range of specific client needs, as well as support broader IT transformation initiatives. Emtec's service capabilities span the United States, Canada and countries around the globe.