

K-12 School District Improves Communications with Community

Mobile County Public Schools uses the Digital Media System to share Mobile County School District news, graduation ceremonies, and instructional content on digital signage (Figure 1) and desktop video.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	
MOBILE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • K-12 Education • Mobile, Alabama • 63,000 students, 9100 faculty and staff 	
CHALLENGE	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster a positive perception of the Mobile County School District • Enhance educational excellence • Reduce costs 	
SOLUTION	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deployed a centralized Cisco Digital Media System • Published multimedia content on digital signs in each school • Published the same and additional content on the Cisco Video Portal 	
RESULTS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased awareness of Mobile County School District accomplishments and funding needs • Enriched classroom instruction • Reduced annual in-service costs by US \$5000 • Reduced the effort needed to distribute staff in-service videos from two days to 20 minutes 	

Figure 1. Cisco Digital Signage at Mobile Country Public Schools



Challenge

Located in Alabama, the Mobile County Public School district has 96 elementary, middle, and high schools serving 63,000 students. The largest employer in the State of Alabama, the Mobile County School District has 9100 employees, including 4400 teachers, and a US \$700 million annual budget.

The Mobile County School District constantly strives to enhance community relations, educational excellence, and administrative efficiency. Challenges include:

- **Community relations:** Ensuring that parents and other voters are aware of the Mobile County School District’s accomplishments helps protect funding. “Voters are more likely to support the school district if they know their tax money is well spent,” says David Akridge, executive manager of technology for the school district. But written communications such as newsletters and bulletins often get lost among the multitude of papers that parents and other voters receive constantly.
- **Educational excellence:** Today’s students grow up with and expect multimedia content, and teachers increasingly supplement classroom instruction with video. Many teachers used instructional videos they had found on public video-sharing websites, but they could not easily share videos with other schools in the school district.

- **Administrative efficiency:** The Mobile County School District wanted a more cost-effective way to conduct its annual in-service training, which is mandated by the state. The in-service usually features motivational speakers as well as instruction on new classroom techniques. Renting a space that can hold all 9100 school district's employees' costs US \$3000 to \$5000. To save money, the Mobile County School District began videotaping the presenters and mailing out DVDs, but the process still consumed two full days.

The Mobile County School District's IT department realized that it could meet all of its challenges with a solution for delivering digital media over the network.

Solution

Mobile County Public Schools now uses the Cisco Digital Media System to create, manage, publish, and access high-quality digital media on digital signage as well as on a desktop video portal. The solution recommendation came from Information Transport Solutions, Inc., a Cisco Certified Premier Partner that works closely with the Mobile County School District. "Mobile County Public Schools already has a reliable Cisco network that it uses for Cisco Unified Communications," says Henry Zeigler, Account Manager, Information Transport Solutions. "We recommended the Cisco Digital Media System because it would enable Mobile County Schools to manage content in one place but give them the choice to publish it on digital signage, the Cisco Video Portal, or both."

Digital Signage

The Mobile County School District is currently deploying 50-inch digital signs in every school lobby so that parents, visitors, and staff can conveniently watch videos of Mobile County School District news (Figure 2). "Our first priority is to use the Cisco Digital Media System for communications that promote a positive attitude toward the school system from the community," says Akridge. All 96 locations, which include vocational schools, will have a digital sign by June 2009. Types of content shown on the digital signage include:

Figure 2. Mobile County Public Schools uses Cisco Digital Signage to Announce and Deliver Live Events such as the Inauguration



- A weekly 30-minute news program that showcases Mobile County School District initiatives such as the use of innovative technology in the classrooms
- A scorecard that highlights Mobile County School District accomplishments
- Announcements about events such as PTA meetings
- Budget information
- Student profiles
- Videos produced by students in the high school
- Live video of graduations

Teachers or administrators who want to publish digital content on either the digital signs or the Cisco Video Portal just submit an MPEG-4 video file to the Mobile County School District IT department. “A 30-second video takes five minutes to encode and another five minutes to upload,” says Zeigler. Information Transport Solutions, the Cisco partner, developed attractive templates with areas for video and accompanying text, and the IT department can quickly update the content using a web interface.

Video Portal

Students, teachers, staff, and visitors who visit the Mobile County School District’s Cisco Video Portal can watch full-size videos on a PC or laptop. Teachers use the Cisco Video Portal to show content that reinforces classroom instruction. Relatives and friends who cannot attend graduation ceremonies in person can view them live on the web, from any location in the world. And teachers and staff watch in-service speakers on the Cisco Video Portal, saving the time, fuel costs, and carbon emissions associated with driving up to 50 miles.

Unified Communications

Mobile County Public Schools uses its Cisco network as the platform for other applications besides the Cisco Digital Media System. For example, in 2005, the Mobile County School District replaced its Centrex system with Cisco Unified Communications, placing a phone in every classroom. “The system paid for itself in less than 18 months by eliminating the need for 5000 telephone lines,” Akridge says. Phones are used for parent-teacher communications as well as for public address, using the built-in speakers of the phones. Soon, teachers will be able to press a key on their classroom IP phone to start recording the incident, alert the office, and send an alert to pre-specified digital signs.

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—David K. Akridge, Executive Manager of Technology, Mobile County Public School System

Results

The Cisco Digital Media System is helping Mobile County Public Schools meet its goals for improved communications, educational excellence, and cost savings.

Enhanced Communications with the School Community

The Cisco Digital Media System plays an important role in the Mobile County School District’s strategic plan to improve communications between parents, teachers, administrative staff, and the public. Anyone who visits a school district location can watch an eye-catching video about the Mobile County School District’s accomplishments and financial situation. “We share weekly updates about test scores, PTA events, where we are spending money, and more, in two- or three-minute videos that people are likely to watch,” says Akridge. The Mobile County School District publishes the same videos on the Cisco Video Portal, without any incremental costs other than a minute or two to set up the links.

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Using the digital signage and Cisco Video Portal to provide streaming video of graduations has increased community goodwill. "The father of one our students who graduated in 2008 was stationed in Iraq," says Akridge. "He was able to log into the video portal to watch his daughter walk across the stage and receive her diploma, live. The story made national news." Mobile County Public Schools also streams video of the graduation ceremony for the University of South Alabama, which has a close relationship with the Mobile County School District.

Enriched Curriculum

When teachers submit a video for the Cisco Video Portal, it becomes available to all schools throughout the Mobile County School District. An elementary school and middle school have placed digital signs in the cafeteria to show educational videos during the lunch hour. "Students have another opportunity to learn during the day, and we're also anticipating a decrease in disruptive behavior," Akridge says.

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Cost Savings

Cisco Video Portal has reduced in-service costs. "We are saving \$3000 to \$5000 annually by eliminating the need to rent space for our in-service," says Akridge. "We're also saving the time, fuel costs, and environmental impact of 9100 people driving up to 50 miles to a central location." And while burning and mailing 200 to 300 DVDs took two full days, posting the video and emailing the link takes just 20 minutes.

Next Steps

Now that the Cisco Digital Media System is in place, the Mobile County School District plans to increase its return on investment in the following ways:

- **Campus safety:** The Mobile County School District plans to use the digital signs to publish warnings and instructions in case of events such as tornadoes, fires, intruders, or campus lock-downs.
- **Community-wide communications:** The Mobile County School District is investigating deploying digital signs at the Chamber of Commerce, airport, and large employers, playing videos that keep the business community and parents informed about school district activities and accomplishments. One idea under consideration is sharing costs with local businesses, which could also use the digital signage for their own multimedia content.
- **Classroom safety:** Information Transport Solutions, Inc. is integrating the Cisco Digital Media System with the Mobile County School District's Cisco Unified Communications system. Teachers will be able to press a panic button on their classroom's Cisco Unified IP Phone to send an alert to digital signs in the school or school district.

- **Enterprise TV:** The Cisco Digital Media System's Enterprise TV application enables schools to deliver on-demand video and broadcast live TV channels over an IP network to digital signage displays. Staff and students access video content using on-screen menus and program guides. The solution could reduce the Mobile County School District's long-term costs. "Unlike cable TV, Enterprise TV does not require pulling coaxial cable to each classroom," says Zeigler. "And Enterprise TV can share the same classroom controller as smartboards, reducing equipment needs."

For More Information

PRODUCT LIST
<p>Switching and Routing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catalyst 3560, 3750, 4500, 6500 switches • Cisco 2800 and 3800 routers
<p>Video, Cable, and Content Delivery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cisco Digital Media System, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Cisco Video Portal ◦ Cisco Digital Media Manager ◦ Cisco Digital Media Encoders 1000 and 2000 ◦ Cisco Digital Media Players ◦ Scientific Atlanta Encoders for live video broadcasts
<p>Unified Communications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cisco Unified Communications Manager • Cisco Unified IP Phones
<p>Wireless</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cisco Aironet Wireless Access Points

To find out more about Cisco Digital Media system, go to: <http://www.cisco.com/go/dms>.

To find out more about Cisco Unified Communications go to: <http://www.cisco.com/go/unifiedcommunications>.

To find out more about Cisco solutions for education, go to: <http://www.cisco.com/go/education>.



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