



Growing IT Services—Without Growing the IT Team

When you take care of technology for school districts, you often need to grow your services, without growing your team—or your budget. Such is the case for the Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District (TBAISD) in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Their 300-person admin team supports 34 public and private schools across five counties in the area. Plus, they often host conferences where 150 teachers gather to share ideas.

Meeting growing demands on their networks

To keep all these classrooms and conference rooms running smoothly, TBAISD needs the network at their admin building to run smoothly, too. But with more and more mobile devices entering the equation, that task is becoming a bigger challenge.

“In just three years since I started in this role, the number of devices we support has quadrupled,” said Brandi Reynolds, director of technology at TBAISD. “But the number of people on our IT team has stayed the same.”

Plus, their admin group works out of a sturdy older building, with walls of rebar and concrete. So to be sure they get great Wi-Fi coverage, they sprinkled in 200 Cisco® access points across the building. And this is double what a single Cisco Mobility Express controller can handle.

Traverse bay area intermediate school district

Industry:

Education

Location:

Grand Rapids, Michigan

Size:

365 administrators
(<500 simultaneous users)

“To work around this limit, we split our network to talk to two different Mobility Express controllers,” said Andy Wolfe, network admin at TBAISD. “Half of our access points talk to a controller that’s over in another building. This has been a good fit for us for three years. But we’re always open to trying to something new.”

Getting off to a promising start

Before school started in August 2019, Andy spent a few hours subbing in 21 new Cisco Catalyst® 9115 and 9117 Access Points in several key places in the building—including the conference rooms. Already, he and Brandi can see several big benefits to these new Cisco access points.

For one, they’re more powerful. “They seem to handle a lot more clients,” said Andy. “We haven’t seen them get close to topping out their bandwidth or memory, even on days when we’ve hosted conferences.”

For another, they’re easy to manage. “They just work,” said Andy. “I haven’t had to babysit them at all. And as a visual person, I really appreciate the new dashboard, with its icons and graphs. If there’s an issue, I can easily drill down to pinpoint the access point—and who’s on it.”

“It’s really important for us to have access points that are easy to set up, manage, and troubleshoot,” said Brandi. “Even if we save only 10–15 minutes here and there, it can really add up. Especially on days when we have 150 people here for a conference.”

Planning what’s next

With this early demo going so well, they’re already thinking ahead to how they can roll out new Cisco access points across their building—and beyond.

“We’re due for a full Wi-Fi refresh in the next few years,” said Brandi. “So getting to try out these new Cisco access points ahead of time has given us a head start on our planning. Maybe we can reduce or maximize the number of access points we have installed. And we might also roll them out to nearby schools, to help light up some Wi-Fi ‘dark’ spots.”

Andy added, “We’ll do a wireless site survey to see if we can get away with, say, one access point in every other room. We might also be able to bring more of our access points under the same controller. And for our bigger rooms, like our conference rooms, I’m already confident we can get down to one access point to cover the whole area.”

It’s a great example of how Cisco tech can help an IT team stretch to do more—without adding more people.

Trying out new Cisco tech

They soon got their chance. Because TBAISD was already running Cisco Mobility Express, they were an ideal candidate for an early field trial of new Cisco 9100 Access Points with the Embedded Wireless Controller. These deliver a Wi-Fi 6 network that is simple, resilient, secure, and intelligent. All while being easier to install than your Wi-Fi at home.

TBAISD was tapped for the field trial by Cisco partner Presidio, a local digital expert who they’ve worked with for over a decade. “Presidio has been a wonderful vendor to work with on all things networking,” said Brandi. “For years, we’ve relied on them to help us stay up to date on the latest trends, buy the best products, and fix any issues that crop up.”

“Back in 2009, Presidio (then Netch) helped us put in our first full campus wireless system,” said Andy. “Since then, they’ve helped us upgrade regularly, including to our Cisco Mobility Express units three years ago. So when they let us know about these latest Cisco access points, we were on board to try them out.”