
Building an Online Community with FirstClass

Conroe Independent School District



Conroe ISD's Communications Challenge

Three years ago Conroe Independent School District in Texas was looking to improve communication across their school district. This district in Texas consists of approximately 40,000 students in 45 schools. With a mix of communication products including cc:mail, Netscape, and Groupwise, the district could not find a solution that would build an online community to meet their district-wide vision: "To be a learning community united in its commitment to ensuring all students graduate with confidence and competence. The schools and communities work together to provide performance standards applied to the real world." Conroe realized that harmonizing their infrastructure would be important for building an online community.

A FirstClass Solution

Jan Robin, Instructional Technology Specialist at Conroe ISD had used FirstClass at Texas A&M University as a student, and enjoyed the features and capabilities of FirstClass. Jan and her staff participated in a demonstration of FirstClass collaboration examples in other schools. Jan was very supportive of the product, and so were her colleagues as they had found their current mix of products difficult to use, implement, and administer. "We have a limited number of Administrative staff, so we needed an easy to use yet powerful solution", says Jan Robin. The school district made a decision to purchase the FirstClass Collaboration Platform. FirstClass has since revolutionized the way that resources are shared and technology is utilized to extend opportunities for learning.

FirstClass was initially rolled out to professional, administrative, and support staff workers. At first, they used only FirstClass' rich email features. "It offers a slicker, easier, less cumbersome interface, yet is very professional looking", describes Robin, "FirstClass then became the vehicle for transferring all of the school's electronic files amongst the community". As the school continued to roll it out, they created model desktops for each campus with shared calendars and other collaborative areas for specific discussions. The online community was beginning to grow.

A requirement by the Superintendent of Schools is that teachers have a method of publishing course assignments and syllabus information to the web. FirstClass provides a very simple web publishing tool that enables Conroe's teachers, from new computer users to the technically savvy, to manage a Home Page folder. This area enables instructors to communicate important information to the larger online community, such as assignments and a syllabus. Some teachers have created collaborative areas and class calendars and posted them online, including their schedule for the day with work assignments. "FirstClass is simple enough to learn that and then they learn how to use FirstClass by using it. We have a training course for people to want to learn how to administer the system." remarks Jan Robin.

Next Steps: FirstClass Voice Services and Integration with External Databases

Moving forward, Conroe is looking forward to using advanced FirstClass customization tools such as the FirstClass Designer to create customized FirstClass forms, and FirstClass RAD, a Rapid Application Development toolkit, that enables FirstClass to communicate with other administrative databases, and pulls user information from other systems. With the use of RAD, many administrative tasks can be automated, making managing the system even easier.

FirstClass Voice Services is currently used at the Administration level and Conroe is running FirstClass Voice Services against a Cisco Call Manager system. They use Voice Services for voicemail, faxing, and as an auto attendant for the school. FirstClass was easily programmed to automatically transfer voicemail messages directly into organized FirstClass mailboxes. Conroe ISD is also planning to implement FirstClass Voice Services for campus staff, so that they can receive their email messages any time, from anywhere, using a standard or mobile phone, web browser, or PC using a FirstClass client.

Conroe ISDs move to the FirstClass Platform started as a modernization project. Now, FirstClass is the platform that the district's administrators, staff, students, and community turn to for collaboration and communication. Conroe is an excellent example of an existing school district who built a collaborative solution that is the basis for all communication, using email, collaborative areas, shared calendars, instant messaging, and FirstClass Voice Services; this has enabled the district to achieve its goal of building a powerful online community that transforms and fosters educational communication and collaboration.

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