

A District Solution for Communicating, Collaborating, and Working Online

"This is our life. It's the way we communicate. It's the way we share information. FirstClass has completely changed the way in which we operate."

- Stewart Lynch, Director of Instruction, Technology and Information Services, Richmond School District

- Organization:** Richmond School District
Industry: Education
Application: District-wide communication and collaboration
Results:
- Centralized access to voice, fax and email messages from any device
 - Improved responsiveness to students, colleagues, and parents
 - Simple web publishing for teachers and the district website
 - Single point of contact for teaching resources and shared lesson planning

About Richmond School District

Located in a suburb of Vancouver, Canada, Richmond School District serves 2,400 teaching, administrative, and support staff and 23,500 students in more than 58 locations. In addition, as a publicly funded educational institution, the District is responsible to the community to implement cost-effective solutions that address both their administrative requirements, and the learning requirements of students.

The Communications Challenge

"We're a very distributed organization. We have over 58 sites -- elementary and secondary schools, alternate schools, a central office, maintenance facility ... it's difficult to communicate in a timely manner," says Stewart Lynch, Director of Instruction, Technology and Information Services. Traditionally, the district would send paper-based memos and information out to schools in trucks twice a week. In addition to the cost of transportation, paper and other consumables, information would often be outdated shortly after it was printed.

"Money is always a factor, and we need to be able to make the best use of all our resources. We can't afford to have a large IT department anywhere near the proportions of most corporations. So the total cost of ownership of any product is important to us," says Lynch.

The district's objective was to find a cost-effective solution that would allow them to manage information efficiently, and give staff access from wherever they happened to be working, whether that was a classroom, a district office, or even from home. And, with so many remote locations, whatever technology they chose had to be easy to learn and use, and flexible enough to address both their instructional and administrative requirements.

"Ease of use is paramount for us. We can't afford to go out and do training simply because we are distributed over 58 sites. And there's no way that we can get everybody in one room, so the product had to be intuitive," explains Lynch.

Finding a communications software package that addressed all these requirements is a challenge that all school districts face. However, with Lynch's experience using FirstClass in a previous district, the choice was clear.



The FirstClass Solution

Balancing instructional needs with administrative responsibilities was essential to Richmond School District's selection of FirstClass for their district communications platform. FirstClass provides a comprehensive solution that combines the best of all worlds to meet the needs of their entire K-12 community -- administrators, teachers, students and parents.

Designed for use in educational environments, FirstClass provides a robust set of functions for multimedia-enriched communication, collaboration, teaching and learning. Unlike basic email packages, it integrates multimedia messaging, web publishing, calendars and shared workspaces into a single, cohesive environment.

"Any other solution that we looked at required us to have multiple servers distributed around the district, which would require multiple configurations for users, and multiple administrators," says Lynch. "With FirstClass, having a powerful application in a central, single server and being able to deliver the same services to all users is economical for us. And we can meet our needs with very little technical support. In fact, I manage our FirstClass system off the side of my desk, so we have no full-time technical administrator. It just runs."

Saving resources by not having to employ highly-trained and certified technical staff, and not having to conduct costly training, allows them to invest in supporting other activities around the district. "You don't need to be a technical person to be able to manage the system," says Lynch.

For a school district that provides both PC and Macintosh computers for staff and students, the fact that FirstClass is a fully cross-platform solution was also essential. "Having a cross-platform solution for a school district is very important. The product is absolutely identical on both sides, there's no inferior Macintosh client or inferior PC client. To the end users, the menus are identical, functionality is exactly the same. There is absolutely no difference."

Teachers in the district agree on FirstClass' ease of use and cross-platform flexibility. "When students are using FirstClass, they can log onto their account from home and work on something, and when they come to school and open it on a Mac, it's identical," enthuses Gord Powell, a Teacher-Librarian who also uses FirstClass to teach a distributed learning course across the district. "The layout is the same, the features are the same, the commands are the same -- so it's very easy for them to use, and likewise for teachers."

Because the FirstClass interface is so easy for staff to navigate, the district has used the FirstClass RAD suite of tools to create applications that allow users to access ODBC data stores right from their FirstClass desktop. Staff now has information at their fingertips that was traditionally only available to limited staff, or only in printed format. "FirstClass RAD gives us the ability to develop online applications. One of the big features for us is the ability to access our databases. For example, one application catalogs the teaching resources that are available for teachers. In FirstClass, the teachers search for the available materials, and can even reserve them online," Lynch explains.

For Richmond School District, developing a total communications and collaboration solution is an ongoing process. Recently, the district added FirstClass Unified Communications to their communications environment. "With Unified Communications we are now able to consolidate all of our voice, fax and email messages into a single, unified mailbox. I can be anywhere in the world and if someone needs to send me a fax, I don't have to be at my office, I can retrieve the fax anywhere."

The benefit of Unified Communications for teachers and administrators is the ability to access information and communicate in a timely manner. "It's allowed us to give the teachers, administrators, and students the flexibility of time. They are no longer confined to the 8 till 4 o'clock timeframe in a school, because they know they'll be able to access FirstClass from anywhere to post and review assignments, respond to messages from parents, and review important information from the board office," says Lynch.

For a school district, the ability to manage a single application to facilitate everything from information delivery -- such as catalog searches, hosting the district's web site, and publishing calendars of events -- to individual and group communication -- voice, fax, and email messages, shared workspaces, personal home pages, and online learning courses -- is essential.

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