WatchGuard Security Solution Provides Safe Environment for Walker Schools

Background

The Walker County School District is a public school system in the state of Georgia that currently educates approximately 9,300 students from kindergarten to grade 12. The district is comprised of sixteen schools, where approximately 1,500 staff are dedicated to a single goal: "Ensuring all Students Graduate; Ready for College, Ready for Work, Ready for Life."

Walker Schools is leading the country in creating educational opportunities that will prepare students for a changing world. The district partnered with NASA to bring online a lunar observatory at its Science and Technology Center, where students can use and learn from NASA technology. In addition, to teach students about sustainable food growth, Walker Schools has created a groundbreaking k-12 aquaponics program, the first curriculum of its kind in a U.S. school system.

Walker Schools seeks to provide an innovative and encouraging learning environment, ensuring every student is safe, secure, and prepared to succeed.

Situation

Two and half years ago, a tornado tore the roof off Walker County School District's planetarium, exposing their data center to rain. In just twelve hours, all the equipment inside was ruined and the school system lost 95% of its core infrastructure. Although devastated by the loss, the IT team took the opportunity to look critically at their previous system and replace their equipment with better products that would benefit their students and staff.

With twenty facilities, including sixteen schools, a planetarium, and three central service sites, their system needed to administer to up to 11,000 users. The school's initiative to include iPads and other Apple technology in their classrooms meant that the network also needed to be able to serve multiple devices per user including laptops, iPads and iPhones, with the potential for up to 90 devices in a single classroom.

The school district's previous Cisco-based system was cumbersome and difficult to manage, and would be expensive to replace. The IT staff had been plagued by administrative issues, causing internal experts to focus resources on fixing problems instead of expanding services and adding more technology.

Walker Schools needed a system that could be implemented within a tight budget, yet still deliver speed, easy administration, and cutting-edge security.

Solution

Walker Schools began evaluating their options, looking at all the major competitors to find a solution to meet their unique needs and provide the best value. "We looked at WatchGuard, Cisco, SonicWALL, and many more. WatchGuard won hands down," explained Swanson.

Walker Schools worked with a local WatchGuard partner, Mike Collins & Associates, who provided consultation to find the best solution and quickly reinstate their school network. Together, they implemented WatchGuard's XTM 1050s to reconnect lost services and ensure as little downtime as possible after the storm, while dramatically increasing network speed and performance in the process.

Vice President of Mike Collins & Associates, Hal Landreth, explained WatchGuard's all-in-one advantage: "You look at the other manufacturers, you've got to buy a piece for this, you've got to buy a VPN piece, you've got to buy an SSL piece, so you've got four and five devices that you've got to purchase to get the one solution you can get in the WatchGuard box."

Two years after implementing the XTM 1050s, Walker Schools upgraded once again to get the latest from WatchGuard, adding smart security features like URL filtering, app control, e-mail monitoring, virus protection, and spam blocking, giving the school system unrivaled protection.

"We went from WatchGuard XTM 1050s, and upgraded to dual XTM 2520s; the fastest, greatest thing right now from WatchGuard. I can't find anybody else's equipment that will equal it," said Swanson.

Long-term ROI Increased through Quality, Redundant Solution

Upgrading to the dual XTM 2520s meant that the school had redundant systems in the case of another incident threatening the network. By utilizing VPN failover and WAN failover features, Walker Schools ensures mission-critical data keeps flowing and teachers can continue providing the best learning environment for their students.

Investing in WatchGuard's unified security solution ensures Walker Schools will receive tremendous long-term value through high-quality hardware. Getting appropriate funding within a public school environment is a reoccurring challenge, but choosing WatchGuard is predicted to benefit the district with continued use for the next five to ten years.

"The great thing is that when you buy WatchGuard it stays around. With the diversity of buildings we have, we can move our current core stuff out to one of our schools that may be needing more bandwidth or capabilities, and use the newer 2520 boxes in the newer buildings with the highest bandwidth needs. We can always use the older WatchGuard boxes. The hardware works, and it continues to work," said Swanson.

Tripled Network Speed Allows for Faster Response Time and Real-Time Network Insight

Since implementing WatchGuard technologies, Walker Schools has seen a vast increase in speed and bandwidth capability. The new solution has been able to handle heavy network traffic seamlessly, increasing response time within the student information system.

According to Michael Tipton, Technology Coordinator for Walker Schools, "We had the opportunity to replace a Cisco router using WatchGuard and we almost tripled our speed." The new solution also increases visibility into user data, providing rich reporting functionality and effortless, real-time monitoring built-in, capturing new insight for administrators.

Customized Smart Security Technology Protects Students and Staff

With WatchGuard's smart security features, administrators are able to force safe search in Google, Yahoo, MSN and other websites through the XTM devices, along with automatic image filtering. With less inappropriate material and more of what students are looking for, Walker Schools knows their students are surfing securely and effectively.

Social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter are also blocked for students, but the customizable solution allows for individual use for teachers who use social media pages to provide information to parents and engage the community. By utilizing role-based access control, administrators can create individual privilege sets to correctly allow or deny web-access intuitively and with ease. The user-friendly WatchGuard console centrally manages all security functions creating easy review of flagged content.

"WatchGuard is smarter than our previous technology. It knows what to filter and when to do it," said Swanson.

Improved Classroom Productivity Leads to Record Test Scores and Increases Registration

Because of the increase in classroom productivity due to WatchGuard's innovative technology, students are learning more and performing better on exams.

"Since all the kids are staying on the ball with what they're supposed to be doing in the classroom, our testing scores have gone up. We've had some of our highest testing scores this last year that we've ever had," said Swanson.

Test scores reports have been so attractive that Walker Schools has seen an increased number of student registrations from outside the district. Students who previously attended private schools have now switched to Walker Schools after seeing the innovative learning environment that has been created with the help of WatchGuard.

Moving Forward

With WatchGuard security solutions in place, administrators rest easy knowing their students are protected and more productive in the classroom. The IT team can now focus on adding more tools for learning to better prepare students for the future.

"It has given us the ability to move on and expand our infrastructure and technology capabilities in the district," said Swanson.

For Walker Schools, WatchGuard has enabled them to provide the best learning environment for their students and deliver on their goal to prepare students for college, work, and life. The seamless transition to WatchGuard instills Walker Schools with confidence that they made the best decision.

"The one word that I would use to describe everything from WatchGuard would be amazing. It just works," said Swanson.

Resources

📄 Download Printable Version (https://www.watchguard.com/docs/casestudies/wg_walker-schools_cs.pdf)

🎥 Watch Video (https://www.youtube.com/v/7tN5UvIWB-k?fs=1&width=640&height=480&hl=en_US1&rel=0&iframe=true&autoplay=1)

↗ All Case Studies (/wgrd-resource-center/case-studies/)

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