

Learning Curve

The largest school district in Georgia finds a better way to manage electronic accounts and provisioning.

Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) is the largest school system in Georgia. Located in the metropolitan Atlanta area, GCPS prides itself on academic accomplishment. In 2009, the district became only the second school system in Georgia to be selected as one of five finalists for the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education. The \$2 million prize is the largest education award given to school districts in the United States.

This recognition validates the school system's continuous commitment to excellence. The district embraces technology to help further students' success. Pupils have access to live homework help, online media resources and many other technology tools. But students all need their own user names, passwords and permissions — even

while moving to the next grade or changing schools. Managing the directory of electronic accounts for students and staff is a huge challenge for GCPS.

The district has approximately 22,000 staff members and 160,000 students. With such a large student population, transitions occur nonstop. Students enter or leave school for a variety of reasons. Students move to other schools within the district. Some move out of the district — and some later move back.

After the vendor discontinued support of the district's existing Active Directory (AD) management system, GCPS decided to look for a new solution. "The old system was showing its age, and after a couple years of increasing load and no upgrades, my team was spending a significant amount of time keeping the old system running," said Terry P.

Chapman, LAN operations coordinator for the district's Information Management Division.

Also, the previous solution for managing AD didn't allow changes to student information to be made quickly. Group management and provisioning tasks were cutting into IT staff time — time that would be better spent supporting technology resources for teaching and learning.

The old system also was inefficient when it came to dealing with students changing schools between school years. And the addition of approximately 1,600 new students each year was difficult to manage. The only solution was to delete all student accounts at the end of each school year and create new ones at the beginning of the following year — a task that became more challenging each year as enrollments increased. The previous system simply couldn't expand to deliver what the district needed.

These limitations led the district to implement a directory management solution from Quest Software. Quest's ActiveRoles Server (ARS) greatly enhanced the district's ability to manage AD. ARS lets the district provision, re-provision and de-provision users quickly and securely. It gives users the proper access, enables the district to quickly create groups and provides an improved audit trail. ActiveRoles Quick Connect extends ARS' capabilities into non-Windows platforms, giving the district the flexibility to leverage its heterogeneous environment.

Big Step Forward

The most important benefit of the new system for the district is the ability to quickly make changes to student information. The district's team includes local school technology coordinators (LSTCs) and technical support technicians (TSTs). Each school has at least one TST who supports its technology resources. Some larger schools have more



than one TST and some smaller schools share TSTs.

Using ARS and a Web interface, a TST can make a change to a student user account and have it take effect almost instantly. With the new system, a TST can go into a lab of 30 computers, make a change to a group assignment and know the change will take effect in just a few minutes. "We had to have the changes near real time, nearly immediately. Quest was able to make that happen for us," said Chapman. "We no longer have to tell TSTs and LSTCs, 'We're sorry, but you need to make your change 30 minutes or an hour ahead of time.'"

TSTs can now easily manage users and groups in their schools, and provisioning, de-provisioning and moving student accounts require less effort and time. And ARS' role-based administration allows the TSTs to ensure that the users and groups they manage have the right access to information they need for learning or to do their jobs, but nothing more.

'E' for Efficient

The new system increases staff efficiency, and it's paying off for the district in numerous ways. "The things we have now that we didn't have before are the speed at which changes happen and the manageability of the system," said Chapman. "It's just more efficient."

The scalability of the new system will help the district grow its capabilities. The new solution allows the district to implement auto-provisioning of students, and the scalability to auto-provision faculty and staff in the near future.

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Terry P. Chapman, LAN operations coordinator, Information Management Division, Gwinnett County Public Schools

Because the IT staff can now make changes quickly, they can stay focused on helping teachers and students fulfill their core missions. "During times when we typically have a lot of students moving between schools, a high school with 3,000 students can have 100 of these changes a day. This is not the most efficient use of a TST's time," said Chapman. "TSTs should be in classrooms, labs and administrators' offices, helping make sure the technology we've worked so hard to make available for teaching and learning is working as designed."

Chapman also noted, "As the number of schools and the number of students increased, the task of creating all of the new accounts in a short period of time became impossible." The new solution alleviates this problem. It creates one account per person, and can keep that same account available no matter how many changes in the person's situation over the years.

Rapid Deployment

The district had an aggressive schedule for implementation, and with the help of Quest partner IBM, it easily met the deadline. The purchase of ARS was approved by the Board

of Education in June 2009, and the tool was up and running the next month. Staff training and other preparations were completed prior to the first day of school on Aug. 10. "As always, our major focus is on supporting teaching and learning," said Chapman. "We had several hard deadlines we had to meet in order to have things ready for the new school year." Despite the short timeline, the district got it done. "The project was completed on time and within budget."

Chapman gives much of the credit to his staff. "We have some of the most dedicated staff here that you can imagine," he said. "These people — they took an impossible task and made it happen. If you look at my timeline for implementing this thing, it's really a testament to their hard work that this got done. Without their hard work and without Quest working with us, we never could have done it."

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