

IT Project Services - Case Study

Marshalls Park School

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The Challenge

As a forward-thinking school, Marshalls Park believes in the value IT can play, both in terms of student learning but also the operation of running the school. However, a network pushed to its limits without the capacity to grow with modern demands was stifling the schools' plans for the future. A network overhaul was required to provide the necessary springboard for IT to play the fullest possible role in school life. A bold project, it would be one of the largest the school had ever embarked upon.

With so much riding on the project, the school decided to tap into the expertise of longstanding IT partner CCS Media. Ricky Tomlin, ICT Manager at Marshalls Park picks up the story. "We simply didn't have the capacity in the old network we needed to meet the demands that could be foreseen in the future. We had legacy cabling across the school, some of our switching hardware had been discontinued and we were operating at sub-1 gigabit speeds which wouldn't be sufficient in the long-term. We needed sound advice and prudent recommendations".

Whilst the project began by looking at the cabling across the school, questions surrounding long term suitability were soon asked of the core and edge switching infrastructure, and whilst not an immediate priority, the wireless network deployed in the school.

The Solution

CCS Media believed that using a cloud-based solution from Cisco-Meraki, Marshalls Park could achieve a number of wins from the same project. The Meraki solution is unique in that for wireless networks it dispenses with the need for an access controller in the data centre, instead access points are managed through an internet console. The technology extends beyond simply wireless networks however, enabling users to manage fixed networks also through the same dashboard interface.

An ageing network infrastructure was stifling the role IT could play in both learning and the operation of the school. Both wired and wireless networks would need to be revamped.

"Although the cabling was the initial priority, the effect of this change was going to be compromised by the core and edge switching infrastructure if it remained the same. I had some ideas around what they could consider and, if indeed they liked my suggestions, could radically improve the wireless network in the same project."

Marshalls Park were impressed with the Meraki offering. "Instantly, we could see how easy the network would be to manage. The controls in the console were very polished and demonstrated the solution was more than just wireless. We could see the advantages for our technicians and were quickly sold on the solution over other, more conventional alternatives" professes Tomlin.

Whilst the wireless network was not such a pressing priority Marshalls Park could see the value in improving this element of the infrastructure in tandem. "They had always maintained wireless would come later, despite having numerous frustrations with coverage and reliability. With the Meraki solution it would be possible to achieve everything in one go" comments Hutchison.

Requiring their budget to work hard for them, CCS Media went to work to try and negotiate the best possible deal for Marshalls Park. Hutchison continues "we knew budget was going to be a challenge, but also knew the solution had the potential to be a great fit for them. We're a top Cisco partner so we explored all avenues to make it stack up and offer the best commercial deal".

By combining both the wired and wireless technology as a bundled offering, CCS Media were able to come in under budget for the project, despite eventually going head-to-head with three other suppliers on the final pricing. The final solution would therefore include 10gigabit fibre ran to 17 locations around the school, 50 wireless access points and 35 perimeter switches.

The in-house team were technically proficient with the cabling and thanks to the ease of set up of the Meraki hardware, required no formal support to install the switches and access points. As such the solution was delivered in next-to-no-time, taking only a couple of months to craft and literally days following order to begin implementation.

"When CCS Media first suggested a cloudbased solution, I wasn't convinced" explains Tomlin.

"It seemed a bit heavy for what we needed and felt like it would be more suited to big business rather than a single-site school network. I was persuaded to see a demo though and was glad of it!"



"The cost of the solution was very competitive. Whilst we weren't considering wireless initially, we've got that for only fractionally more than we thought we would be spending on the wired network."

The Benefits

Marshalls Park has been really impressed with their new solution. Tomlin exclaims "I like the way we can clone elements of the infrastructure. We can literally set up a switch or access controller and then replicate the setup of that hardware to further devices. We had set up a lot of the network before the devices had even been delivered. What's more is that if an access point or controller dies, Meraki ship a new one out which is pre-programmed and ready to go. You literally just plug it in and it works!"

Nearly 100 mobile devices are roaming the network now, being used by staff and students alike. They are even considering introducing a bring-your-own-device policy for students as there are simple management modules which can quickly be activated in the Meraki solution to cater for this opportunity.

“CCS worked exceptionally hard on this project from start to finish. I am a stickler for wanting to try things first and they gave me every opportunity to see the solution in action, try it and deal with all my questions”

Less obvious benefits like Power over Ethernet (PoE) to the access points also makes them more effective in a classroom environment as they can be moved from conventional locations in the corners of rooms, to central positions for optimum wifi coverage. Similarly, the reports such traffic analysis Network Administrators can generate from the cloud dashboard really help them to proactively monitor and manage the environment to the good of the users.

However, it is the cost of ownership model that really clinches it for Marshalls Park. The investment they have made will see their network infrastructure through the next 10 years. And, as Meraki is based on a subscription model, the cost to run and maintain the network will be predictable and means no unwanted surprises, covering the ongoing access to the cloud console, hardware maintenance and support. Importantly, licenses are not tied to specific access points or hardware, so if they want to upgrade in a few years there will not be further license costs.

Of course, like anything, the proof is in the pudding and this solution is no exception according to Tomlin. “If it is working well people don’t bother you. We’ve heard next to nothing since implementing the new network. What more can I say?” With the new infrastructure in place the school is now considering other projects which were previously thwarted by the old network. Tomlin continues “we are actively exploring running our CCTV over IP and growing biometrics from use in the canteen to the library, lockers and even entry to the school”.

About Marshalls Park School

Marshalls Park School, Havering, originally opened in 1936 as Pettits Senior Council School. In 1973 it was amalgamated with Romford County Technical School to form Marshalls Park Comprehensive.

In 1999 the upper and lower school combined to one site, necessitating an 18-month, £5.5 million modernisation, including a new sports hall, refurbished classrooms, music room, computer rooms, large library and science laboratories. The new site was officially opened by the Rt Hon. David Blunkett, MP, Secretary of State for Education.

In 2006, it was designated Specialist Status for the Performing Arts and a new Dance Studio was completed in 2010. The school now has 860 students.



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CCS Media Ltd, Old Birdholme House, Derby Road, Chesterfield, Derbyshire, S40 2EX