Randolph County Schools Deliver Classes Virtually to Rural Students with Polycom Video Collaboration Funded by a Federal Grant

Industry

• Education

Customer Use

• Real-time, face-to-face learning through video collaboration solutions deployed by InCare, a Polycom partner

• Expanded educational opportunities for all of the school district's 2,200 K-12 students

• Broad range of elective courses offered to over 500 high school students via distance learning courses who wouldn't otherwise have such extensive learning opportunities

Solutions

• Polycom® HDX® 8000 room systems at Randolph County School District's seven schools

• Polycom® RealPresence® Mobile video collaboration software for Apple iPad

• Polycom® RSS 4000 for recording and streaming video content for playback on demand

• Polycom® EagleEye™ Director for lifelike interaction between students and teachers

Results and Benefits

• Virtual field trips to Antarctica, Guatemala and other once-in-a-lifetime destinations

• Computer programming, foreign languages, forensic science, marine biology and advanced placement (AP) math made financially feasible

• "Level playing field" in relation to the state's premier school districts

• Enrichment activities, such as virtual discussions with renowned authors and scientists

Overview

The Randolph County School District is responsible for educating more than 2,200 K-12 students at seven schools in central Alabama. The school district serves a rural area of the state with a sparse population, which means enrollment is much lower at many schools in Randolph County than in other Alabama school districts. This creates financial challenges for Randolph County schools—challenges made even more acute due to the budgetary pressures that Randolph County schools, along with many other schools across the United States, have been facing in recent years.

"We've had to make difficult choices about the courses we offer and the activities we make available to students," says Deborah McManus, Technology Coordinator for the Randolph County School District. "Without classrooms full of 25-30 students, it's hard to pay for foreign language classes, AP courses, and many electives. It's also difficult to offer enrichment activities when budgets are tight. Fortunately for us, technology has opened a new world of possibilities. Through video collaboration, we can bring students together from multiple schools to take courses that would be cost-prohibitive at a single school. And now we're expanding video collaboration in exciting new ways, like taking students on virtual field trips to remote destinations around the world."

The school district's Polycom video collaboration network was made possible through a Rural Utilities Service Distance Learning and Telemedicine (RUS DLT) grant from the United States Department of Agriculture. Polycom assisted the school district in navigating the grant application process and securing the funding for numerous video assets, including high definition (HD) audio and video equipment as well as mobile software, utilizing Apple iPads as video-collaboration devices.

Making the most of limited teaching resources across the district

Randolph County Schools are in a challenging financial position, making it difficult to hire teachers for every subject students may want to study in every school. This is particularly true for non-core classes as well as courses for which there would be small class sizes. Among the courses affected by these budgetary limitations are computer programming, forensic science, marine biology, Spanish, and AP mathematics.

"The RUS DLT grant Polycom helped us secure is changing lives. Video collaboration has taken educational opportunities for our students to a whole new level. We couldn't be happier."

Deborah McManus, Technology Coordinator, Randolph County School District

However, the school district understands how valuable these courses can be for high school students who are preparing themselves to enter college and, eventually, a highly competitive workforce.

To overcome this financial challenge and provide students with a world-class education, the school district turned to video collaboration technology from Polycom, allowing the school district to bring together students from many schools in virtual classrooms so a single teacher can educate kids who are spread across hundreds of square miles. The video solutions were deployed by Polycom partner InCare.

Each year, the district's 500+ high school students have the opportunity to study subjects that would be impossible for the school district to offer without video collaboration. And teachers are taking the technology a step further by making themselves available to students for virtual 1:1 assistance outside of regular class time, offering students the same type of support they get in traditional classes.

Enrichment opportunities open up the world to students

Randolph County Schools are also using video to offer all K-12 students once-in-a-lifetime enrichment opportunities through virtual field trips and interactions with subject matter experts.

"We are constantly looking for opportunities to expand the world for our students," says McManus. "That's the big win from video collaboration."

The district originally set a goal of facilitating one virtual field trip per month. But the technology has become so popular that McManus can't even keep track of all the field trips. In one instance, a class visited Antarctica to talk with polar researchers, including a research team from Alabama. In another class, students in Randolph County had a live discussion with a class of students in Guatemala, allowing the children to swap stories about their lives and make connections that would have been inconceivable without high-definition, lifelike video collaboration.

Beyond field trips, teachers are leveraging Polycom video collaboration to arrange author talks, allowing students to discuss books they're reading with the authors. Other teachers are hosting discussions with scientists to help bring their science curriculum to life for their students. Still other classes are learning about law and government by talking with officials in the state capital of Montgomery.

Powerful, simple technology

The Randolph County School District's video network, powered by the Polycom® RealPresence® Platform, has proven to be reliable and easy to use. In fact, McManus said "the system is exceptionally smooth and I can't think of any issues" since the network was first deployed by InCare in 2006.

She added, "Video collaboration has really been a remarkable asset for us. It helps a rural school district like ours level the playing field with premier school districts. The teachers are excited about everything they can do with video, and the students and their families are very appreciative."

About Polycom

Polycom is the global leader in open standards-based unified communications and collaboration (UC&C) solutions for voice and video collaboration, trusted by more than 415,000 customers around the world. Polycom solutions are powered by the Polycom® RealPresence® Platform, comprehensive software infrastructure and rich APIs that interoperate with the broadest set of communication, business, mobile and cloud applications and devices to deliver secure face-to-face video collaboration in any environment.

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