



CUSTOMER SUCCESS STORY

Pittsburgh Public Schools Standardizes on Polycom Telepresence for Distance Learning

Industry

Education

Daily use

- Distance learning and training
- Team meetings
- Presentations and demonstrations

Solution

- Polycom® HDX® mobile and fixed telepresence solutions
- Polycom® MGC™ unified conferencing platforms

Results and benefits

- Enhanced educational experience for K-12 students
- Ability to collaborate with students and schools in other cities and countries
- More cost-effective and productive staff training
- Reduced travel costs for staff attending in-district meetings
- Accelerated problem solving



As the second largest school district in Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh Public Schools serves approximately 28,000 students. Since 2006, the district has earned high marks for its aggressive reform efforts, including its acclaimed “Excellence for All” agenda that has introduced a more rigorous curriculum and a stronger emphasis on professional development for teachers and staff.

Pittsburgh’s push for excellence is one reason the district launched a distance learning program that uses video and audio communications to extend resources and enhance the learning experience at more than 50 schools. Video communications is also helping improve staff training and accelerate problem solving.

Through Pittsburgh’s Distance Learning program, students hone their foreign language skills by playing Spanish Jeopardy with their counterparts in other schools, debaters face off with teams from across town or in another state and math students test their knowledge in video-based contests.

“We want to provide our students with the resources and functionality to expand their educational opportunities above and beyond being tethered to a book or confined to classroom.” says Steve Mandarin, Coordinator of Telecommunications Infrastructure and Operations at Pittsburgh Public Schools.

So to enable an even more engaging educational experience, the district began in 2008 to expand upon its district-wide distance learning footprint with Polycom® HDX® telepresence solutions and a Polycom® MGC™ conferencing platforms.



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Steve Mandarino, Coordinator of Telecommunications Infrastructure and Operations, Pittsburgh Public Schools

These units have been so well received that the District will be eventually replacing its legacy video conferencing systems with this equipment thus adopting it as the new distance learning standard.

Learning lessons from growing pains

“Our first stab at using this technology, we had some growing pains,” recalls Mandarino. The traditional systems, he says, proved too sensitive for the dynamic K-12 classroom environment. “Stuff happens in schools, and sensitive equipment doesn’t fair well. The end result is more field support time required to address issues which taxes limited staff resources and makes the systems unavailable for the students and staff.”

But Polycom solutions are different, he says. “Our staff is excited about the hardiness of the Polycom systems. They’re easier to use and aren’t as sensitive as the previous systems. They’re much less challenging for us and the sound quality is a significant upgrade.”

Polycom scores high on customer service as well. “Polycom proactively takes steps to ensure that I don’t have to get involved. It has been a very positive experience, because I don’t have time to baby sit every piece of equipment nor do I have time to constantly seek out solutions and/or support for various issues.”

Standardizing on Polycom

With its decision to standardize on Polycom, the district will be gradually replacing its legacy systems as federal e-Rate funding becomes available each year for technology upgrades. “We have 55 endpoints now up and running, and about 20 percent of those are Polycom,” Mandarino says. “We’ll need another 12 or 13 to completely equip all of our district facilities and provide everyone access to Distance Learning/ Training functionality.”

One such program—and a proven hit—is the district’s participation in MegaConference Jr. The annual full-day video conferencing event engages schools throughout the world in educational and cultural programs. “It was such a

success that we’ve replicated that idea and are doing our own MegaConference among schools in the district,” says Peggy Shields, Pittsburgh’s coordinator of instructional technology.

In another program, an arts-focused school in Pittsburgh holds monthly video conferences with a similarly oriented school in Ireland. The district also offers virtual field trips to museums and on-demand programs available to any class whose building is equipped for video.

Beechwood Elementary’s Marie Mrvos recently relied on the network to engage her students in a NASA-sponsored project to “rescue” a malfunctioning spacecraft gone off-course. The 12-week math and science program culminated in a video conference with NASA’s “mission control.” When Beechwood students learned their efforts helped save the craft and crew, many stood and cheered.

“Video conferencing puts the world at our fingertips,” says Mrvos. “As they were walking out of the distance learning lab for the first time, the kids wanted to know when the next video conference was going to be.”

Extending the infrastructure

Eventually, says Shields, Pittsburgh plans to use video to bring classes like AP physics to schools that lack instructors certified to teach them. But doing so means the video infrastructure must extend to every school.

“That’s the next phase—to make this an embedded and standard part of technology available for every site thus providing the technical environment that can support everyday curriculum,” says Mandarino.

That should be easy enough, based on the feedback from students and staff. “The quality of the audio and video really stands out for users,” Mandarino says. “The HD audio quality, in particular, is impressive. Polycom’s noise cancellation technology is a huge advantage in a school environment, where there’s so much background noise. Now students can really hear what’s going on.”

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Staff and faculty benefit, as well. “A big part of our drive for excellence involves professional development,” says Mandarino. “To move staff from one area of Pittsburgh to another for a training session is a huge undertaking, requiring us to utilize back-up staff and substitutes. But if all facilities have distance learning capabilities, then trainees can stay at their own facility and schedule sessions accordingly. We can rotate staff throughout the day, so training can be much more cost-effective and productive.”

The district’s video communications network will enable staff to be more responsive and quarterly in-person meetings can happen monthly via video. “A problem that might have taken three months to be identified and solved can be addressed within the first month.”

With a current total of 12 Polycom HDX systems—three mobile cart-based units and nine stationary systems—Pittsburgh Public Schools is maintaining its focus on outfitting every facility with Polycom solutions. “We’ve built three new facilities this year, and they all have Polycom telepresence systems. Distance learning/training technology is embedded into all facilities now as part of the standard environment just as network drops, wireless access and phones are.”

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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