An East Coast urban charter school system began in the late ‘90s with the mission to close the achievement gap and prepare low-income students to graduate from college. With 49 college prep schools today in three states, the growing charter school system continues to demonstrate outstanding student academic performance and improvement.

Technology is a big part of this charter school system’s success in mitigating the effects of being a student that is living in poverty. To sustain this success, the charter school system creates and continually fine-tunes its systems to help its teachers teach and its students learn. That’s no small feat with more than 13,000 students, 1,200 teachers, three headquarter locations and 100 administrative and management personnel in the system—and growing.

mindSHIFT raises the grade at a growing charter school system with expert Managed IT Services, reliable technology and custom application development

Challenge

In 2009, this charter school system was reaching the point of needing a new outsourced IT partner. They had grown to 14 schools and were running lean with just a handful of internal IT staff.

They turned to a third-party IT partner to help them manage the challenges that came with this added growth. But that relationship brought more problems than solutions. Summer was an especially trying time for the relationship, as the provider scrambled to install the IT infrastructure, workstations, systems and cabling in time to open the new locations. There was no coordinated effort with the system’s facilities management teams, which routinely delayed launch objectives.

Adding to the frustration, the IT partner didn’t have a fully staffed helpdesk. When issues arose at one of the charter school system’s locations, the provider’s technicians were slow to fix the problem.

As a result, the charter school system concluded it had the wrong IT partner. The provider was better suited to smaller organizations with one or two schools, not a growing system of charter schools.

The charter school system wanted an IT partner that could help them on their journey to excellence and continuous growth. They needed a partner that could not only provide IT services but also strategic thought leadership in planning and decisions that affect their business. They also needed a partner that could recommend the most cost-effective and efficient way to do things—and then go execute on their behalf. This partner would have to guide them in product selection, program management, budget planning and facilities coordination so goals could be met on time, every time.

The charter school system issued an RFP and mindSHIFT, a Ricoh company with a developing practice dedicated to charter schools, stood out as the right partner for the job.

While these students come from a disadvantaged position, in the charter school system classrooms, they now have the technology advantages they need to close the achievement gap.

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Solution

To start, mindSHIFT brought in a program manager to oversee the new location launches in the summer. The manager established a process and industry best practices to ensure the smooth deployment of IT technology every time a new school opened.

mindSHIFT transitioned the charter school system to a cloud infrastructure, with servers co-located or hosted at a mindSHIFT datacenter instead of the system’s headquarters’ locations. Today, the system has a total of 87 servers—with 15 hosted at mindSHIFT’s datacenter. mindSHIFT also provides internet access and WAN services for all schools, onsite and remote support for all the technology and remote backup of all servers and staff workstations offsite. Eventually, the charter school system plans to completely migrate from this environment to a cloud system where they are no longer responsible for hardware or infrastructure.

As the relationship progressed, new needs emerged for the charter school system. The charter school system had continued to grow and it had more than 5,000 Chromebooks™, 2,300 staff workstations, 2,200 student workstations and more than 1,000 mobile devices to support. ELLs and PARCC testing was also evolving from paper exams to online tests administered via laptops or tablets in the classroom. Approximately 1,300 wireless access points needed to be managed to ensure a successful student experience and outcome.

Working with mindSHIFT, the charter school system successfully transitioned from paper to online exams. mindSHIFT conducted system analysis prior to the migration to determine what upgrades were needed for online testing. mindSHIFT representatives were also on site during testing, making recommendations to the state and test provider, Pearson North America, to make the process more seamless.

Just as significant, mindSHIFT demonstrated its expertise in custom applications development for the charter school system. As the system’s existing repository for sharing student information would no longer be upgraded, the charter school system needed a better solution.

mindSHIFT built a custom intranet curriculum management application based on Microsoft® SharePoint™ that teachers can use to search for information based on curriculum subjects and grade level. As an example, a teacher moving into a fifth-grade position could use the application to see what curriculum is authorized for that particular grade across the charter school system.

mindSHIFT also migrated the charter school system to Microsoft® Office 365™. Their existing server infrastructure had reached end-of-life and they needed a solution to reduce infrastructure and hardware costs, add storage capacity and improve the hardware replacement lifecycle. Office 365 delivered all those things plus it came with bundled licensing and a robust, built-in mobile device management (MDM) solution for streamlined, easy management. Over the course of two years, mindSHIFT implemented a rolling schedule to implement Office 365 at each school and provided next-day support if issues arose.

All totaled, the charter school system has made amazing strides in technology with mindSHIFT as its partner. And that partnership is ongoing as mindSHIFT continues to introduce new ideas such as automated user provisioning for onboarding and offboarding into the new systems.

Results

Working with the charter school system IT team for nearly eight years, mindSHIFT has become both an extension of its headquarters staff and the operations team at each of the 52 schools today. Each year, the charter school system adds at least one new location—and that pattern is set to continue. The system intends to grow to 62 schools by 2020.

The system’s lean IT team has been freed from tasks involving maintenance, break-fix, help desk, IT deployment, data protection, security or onboarding of new locations. Charter school system administrators have also been able to direct more of their attention to strategy. As a result, mindSHIFT meets regularly with administrators to design technology roadmaps, budgets, plans and processes that align with the charter school system’s business strategy and growth plans.

Most important, the system’s previous impediments to growth—agility, IT skills gap, infrastructure requirements, security, and legacy technical debt—have been removed with mindSHIFT’s services and management.
**Expanded Partnership, Innovative Tools**

The charter school system has the utmost confidence in mindSHIFT. Not only for daily IT needs—but developing new tailored applications not available in off-the-shelf solutions. By demonstrating deep application development expertise with the curriculum management tool, the charter school system knows it can count on mindSHIFT to bring even more innovation to the processes of teaching and learning.

**Unique Commitment, Trusted Expertise**

The charter school system believes mindSHIFT has a unique value proposition. It’s people. Everyone on the mindSHIFT team—from technical consultants, engineers and support technicians to program managers and account executives—puts the customer first.

And mindSHIFT can handle it all. Time and again, mindSHIFT has proven to be the right partner for everything from procurement and setups to supplementing during busy times and running the entire IT services.

**Helping Teachers Teach, Students Learn**

Much of this charter school system’s success lies in its ability to enlist the tools and technologies—of today and the future—to prepare students in poverty to graduate from college. While these students come from a disadvantaged position, in the charter school system’s classrooms, they now have the technology advantages they need to close the achievement gap.

The charter school system knows it can count on mindSHIFT to bring even more innovation to the processes of teaching and learning.

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**Find out what we can do for you.**

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