



Churston Ferrers Grammar School sees a communication revolution with Google Apps and Chromebooks



At a Glance

What they wanted to do

- Replace the restrictive webmail system and find a better alternative to slow laptops

What they did

- Implemented Google Apps for Education and trialled Chromebooks

What they accomplished

- Transformed the way the school's population communicate and collaborate
- Built a communications platform that students and teachers love to use
- Saved the school money from having to invest in an expensive on premise solution

Customer

Churston Ferrers Grammar School is a co-educational Academy School near Brixham, South Devon. Over six decades it has built an excellent reputation and was awarded outstanding school grades in every category in the two most recent Ofsted inspections. It employs 120 teachers who support its 950 students.

Challenge

Churston strongly believes in the importance of introducing students to digital communication methods, believing this can help engage them, boost interaction with teachers, broaden their learning experience and prepare them for the world of work and further study. It also sees great value in the use of technology to streamline administrative processes.

"We are lucky to have a highly engaged, curious and hard-working student population and we believe that having the best tools in place to support them and help them engage with one another and their teachers is important to expanding their learning experiences," explains Ben Forte, IT Network Manager at Churston.

The school has invested heavily in technology over the last few years and now offers six computer suites, each with 30 PCs, a digital signage system for school announcements, laptops for use in classes and a new wifi system. However, Churston still had some technical issues with hardware and email communications holding it back from its vision of becoming a digitally equipped learning environment.

Although it had a web-based email system in place, this was not widely used by students or staff as each account had a 10MB mailbox and a 2MB attachment limit. In addition, the mailbox interface was outdated compared to consumer online email options, which meant that students did not use the system in their daily communications. The school's laptops were also slow and prone to viruses, which meant that many teachers had stopped using them.

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—Ben Forte, IT Network Manager at Churston

"We really value the learning opportunities which online communication and collaboration can offer our students and did not want them to miss out due to technical restrictions so we knew we had to look for faster, more exciting alternatives.," explains Forte.

Solution

After considering a number of options for improving its email, Churston chose the online collaboration and communications suite Google Apps for Education, which includes Gmail, Google Docs, Google Calendar and Google Sites.

"There were several web-based email and collaboration systems available for schools but Google Apps appealed the most due to the familiarity of the brand, the 25GB mailbox space within Gmail and the many options it offers for working on group projects, interacting with teachers and storing work. What's more, Google offers this service free for schools, so it was an easy decision," says Forte.

Since switching to Google Apps, email has become a key method of communication between staff, students and parents and the Google Apps suite is extensively used for collaboration in and out of the classroom.

Following this success, Churston is now trialling ten Chromebooks with a view to rolling them out more widely to replace the school's current laptops when they reach end-of-life. Google Chromebooks are laptops with no hard drives, which means nothing is stored on the desktop and all systems and programmes are accessed via the web browser. The lack of software means Chromebooks are extremely fast, easy to deploy and manage.

"Our aim is to make it as simple as possible for teachers to use laptops in the classroom so the focus remains on the lesson and not the technology. The fact that Chromebooks can be up and running within ten seconds means this can now be a reality," explains Forte.

Benefits

Today, Google Apps is used extensively across the entire school population and the way staff and pupils communicate and collaborate has changed completely. While students refused to use the old email system, an average of 300 children now check their Gmail accounts on a daily basis.

Remote access is another important feature of the service, allowing students to log into their Google Apps account to write up their homework. This means there are no excuses for leaving work at home as it can be accessed from anywhere!

The marking process has also been accelerated. When a student has finished their homework they simply share the Doc with their teacher, who then accesses it remotely, adding comments to the document where needed. Google Docs is also used widely in the classroom, with students encouraged to collaborate on the same document at the same time to produce shared projects on relevant topics.

"Our records show that 800 students and staff have created documents within Google Docs, and twice as many are collaborating on documents, which means it is being used exactly as we had hoped, with students working together and sharing information and ideas with their peers and teachers," explains Forte.

The service has also played a role in supporting the pastoral care of students. A group of sixth formers have taken responsibility for an online mentoring system run in a shared Google Spreadsheet, where mentors can be matched with mentees. Another aspect of the suite, Google Calendar, then makes it simple for appointments to be made for mentoring sessions as students can see one another's availability by accessing each other's calendars.

About Google Apps for Education

Google Apps for Education is a free suite of hosted communication and collaboration applications designed for schools and universities. Google Apps includes Google Mail (webmail services), Google Calendar (shared calendaring), Google Docs (online document, spreadsheet, presentation, and form creation and sharing), Google Video (secure and private video sharing – 10GB free) and Google Sites (team website creation with videos, images, gadgets and documents integration), as well as administrative tools, customer support, and access to APIs to integrate Google Apps with existing IT systems.

For more information visit
www.google.co.uk/a/edu

About Google Chromebooks

With hardware and software optimised for the web, Chromebooks provide the best experience for cloud applications and extend the ease of management and flexibility of the cloud to the PC.

For more information visit
www.google.com/africa/http://www.google.co.uk/chromebook/features-try.html#features

While they currently only have a limited stock of Chromebooks, these have been extremely well received by students and staff. As well as using them in class to access collaborative Docs and Sites, a select few students have been allowed to take the devices home so they can use them to complete homework and do online research for projects.

“The Chromebooks are very lightweight and fit easily within a school bag so they can easily be transported by students. They connect easily to home wireless systems so there are no technical issues to contend with here,” explains Forte.

With so much activity happening within Google Apps accounts, and a positive response from those teachers and students involved in the trial, the school is now keen to expand its Chromebook stock.

“The great thing about Chromebooks is that they just work. We took them out of the box and gave them straight to the students as there is no set-up work to be done. Ideally we would like to replace all our netbooks with Chromebooks as soon as possible,” Forte adds.

As these benefits show, Google Apps and Chromebooks have had a transformative effect on the school’s approach to communication, as well as smoothing the administration process. “By introducing Google Apps and Chromebooks we have vastly improved interaction between students, staff and parents. The days of a post-it note in a pigeon hole are long gone! We now have a system that both staff and students love to use as it is simple, convenient and feature-rich. We are confident that by building up our stock of Chromebooks we can further improve these levels of engagement and digital learning, benefiting students and teachers alike,” concludes Forte.

