



Top Ranked School System Connects Teachers with Best-in-Class Technology

About Crown Point Community School Corporation

Crown Point is a growing community of 25,000 residents in northwest Indiana just 45 miles southeast of Chicago. The city's public school corporation, which is what Indiana calls its school districts, has long been known for academic excellence, employing award-winning teachers and administrators and earning a ranking among the nation's top school systems. The city has seven elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school.

Situation

Growing enrollment meant that Crown Point teachers had to manage larger numbers of students. This made it more difficult to bring teachers together to collaborate on curriculum and instruction topics and conduct staff development. When the State of Indiana mandated the required number of minutes per instructional day be 300 in elementary school and 360 in secondary, eliminating Crown Point's planned staff development time, the school corporation had to find a way to provide teacher training and support collaboration.

Solution

To maintain its ranking as an elite school system, Crown Point uses AT&T Connect® to conduct ongoing staff development without interrupting instructional days. The voice, video and web-based conferencing technology generates savings, as Crown Point reduces the need to hire substitutes to cover for teachers participating in staff training; it also makes it easier for Crown Point teachers to collaborate with one another and with teachers outside the school corporation.

Schools of Choice in a Community of Character

Crown Point is the county seat of Lake County, Indiana, a diverse region that includes heavy industry in the north and quiet suburbs to the south. Many residents of the thriving suburb make the daily commute to work in Chicago. The city boasts numerous parks and a historic downtown anchored by the former courthouse, which now houses a restaurant and museum.

Residents are proud of their schools, which are ranked among the best in the nation by independent rating organizations. "One of the reasons that the town is still growing is that we have a very fine school system," said George Tachtiris, Crown Point Schools Director of Technology/Media. In fact, the schools are a selling point for the community.

"Whenever the mayor speaks about encouraging economic growth he almost always mentions the quality of the schools," Tachtiris said. "We're proud of that."

Jim Hardman, Crown Point Schools Director of Curriculum and Instruction, said the district promotes itself as a school of choice in a community of character, encouraging a standard of excellence with high expectations of its teachers, administrators, staff and students. "We don't look at how we perform against the state average," he said. "To improve, we compare ourselves against other high-achieving Indiana schools with a large percentage of students who go on to four-year universities."

School-level Professional Development

As part of this standard of excellence, Crown Point offers regular professional development opportunities to enhance teachers' effectiveness and assist them in developing instructional strategies. But sharp growth in student population meant teachers had to manage larger numbers of students, making it more difficult to bring teachers together to collaborate on curriculum or attend professional development sessions. The school corporation had built a number of half-days into its calendar for parent-teacher conferences and staff development sessions, but two years ago the state of Indiana mandated full instructional days.

Crown Point Community School Corporation Facts

- **Business Needs**
Enhanced professional development and faculty collaboration
- **Networking Solution**
Web-based conferencing platform enables ongoing education and supports teacher teamwork
- **Business Value**
Time and cost savings; more engaged faculty
- **Industry Focus**
Education
- **Size**
7,500 students



“That eliminated all of professional leave and parent-teacher conferences as we knew them,” Hardman said, “so we started looking at ways to use technology to offer training, support collaboration and help us communicate with parents. That really opened the door for us to look at things differently.”

At their regular monthly meeting, Tachtiris asked the AT&T account team to suggest ways to support collaboration and training. “We’ve had a very good experience with AT&T,” he said. “Our lead team has always been very receptive and our local support is outstanding.” To enhance district training initiatives, AT&T suggested AT&T Connect, and IP-based audio, web and video conferencing solution, and established a trial account for Crown Point. “We immediately saw it as a way to create an avenue of communication that would be pretty cost-effective,” Hardman said.

AT&T Connect supports visual presentations, remote collaboration and voice conferencing, giving Crown Point flexible tools for professional development and staff interaction. The school corporation is now able to provide corporation-wide staff development to teachers in their own buildings at the beginning of a school day. “We created ‘late start Wednesdays,’ where we start classes 50 minutes later than other days,” Hardman said. “Now we can have professional development and collaboration between school buildings because of AT&T Connect.”

Powerful New Technology

Officials expect the solution to save time since teachers no longer have to travel to another school to hear a speaker or meet with their colleagues. The solution will also save money in substitute teacher pay. “The rewards are already there,” Hardman said. “It’s been very cost effective for us.”

Crown Point now uses AT&T Connect to communicate information quickly to all staff. In the past, when there was important information to share, officials held staff meetings in each building. “This involved a lot of travel,” Tachtiris said. With AT&T Connect everybody gets the same version at the same time and the school corporation benefits from teacher input. “People at one location can ask a question or share an idea that may not have been thought of at other sites.”

Hardman recently conducted a meeting that linked all of elementary buildings to share information about textbook adoption for 200 participating teachers and administrators. “We set up projectors, mics and amplified speakers in all of the buildings to bring the teachers to a central location at each site, although some people logged on from their own desktops,” he said. Hardman shared documents, using whiteboard tools to highlight and annotate them; participants were able to send public and private notes and ask questions thanks to two-way audio.

Staff quickly saw the benefits of the process. “We got very positive comments, because they were able to get unfiltered information, hear each other’s questions and see all the same things,” Hardman said. The meeting accomplished two important goals – it enabled Crown Point to share information with teachers, Hardman said, and introduced them to a powerful new technology. “Now they can start thinking about how we can use this in our schools.”

Green Meetings and Virtual Donuts

The solution also supports the school corporation’s green initiatives by reducing the amount of paper generated. “I send participants an invitation online and then I can take over their screens to show them something instead of passing out paper,” Hardman said.

Officials have received only one complaint. “Staff tells us they miss the donuts we used to have at meetings,” Tachtiris said. “So at my first technology staff meeting I posted some donuts on the white board, and told them, ‘you bring the coffee and I’ll provide the virtual donuts.’”

A Great Use of Time

Teachers and principals share the enthusiasm of top level Crown Point administrators about AT&T Connect. “Our principals are excited because they don’t have to leave their buildings to participate. They are really engaged and ready to use the solution to host meetings,” Hardman said. Teachers who attended early meetings using AT&T Connect told administrators that it was a great use of their time. “I think people see the value of it,” he said.

“Now we can enhance professional development and collaboration between school buildings because of AT&T Connect.”

– Jim Hardman, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Crown Point Community School Corporation

The district has found that virtual meetings are more effective if the agenda is limited. “We have learned not to try to cover too much,” Tachtiris said. “It’s important to pick one or two topics and have all the materials ready ahead of time. A little preparation on the front end gives us a better chance to hold people’s attention.”

It also helps to build a schedule that allows time for reflection and comment. “Participants need time to respond and react to the material,” Hardman said. “You don’t want to spend the whole time presenting information.”

Lastly, there are times when a face to face meeting may be most appropriate. “We are a people-oriented business and the personal touch is still part of this,” Hardman said. “You have to be careful how you use this solution because you do want to engage people personally.”

21st Century Content Providers

The more Crown Point uses AT&T Connect, the more people find new applications for it. “We’re all thinking of ways to connect our district probably better than ever before,” Hardman said. This includes using the solution to meet virtually with parents. “We already have a system that lets parents go online and look at their students’ grades and attendance, and see their assignments,” Tachtiris said. “AT&T Connect could soon become an extension of a parent phone call – that’s in the works.”

The school corporation recently invited parents to an Internet safety presentation. “We’re looking at sending a link to parents so that in the future they could participate in these presentations from home,” Hardman said.

Crown Point is also investigating ways that teachers could use the solution to drive collaboration among students within and beyond the school corporation, including with its sister school in Germany. "It's a learning process for us," Tachtiris said. "I think we have just scratched the surface of what we can do."

The district is careful not to promote technology for its own sake, but as a tool to improve student and staff development. "Thanks to 21st

century technology we have become the content providers," Tachtiris said. "We don't have to depend on somebody else's prepackaged staff development." Crown Point officials can create information for their presentations that meet the specific needs of its teachers and principals.

"Looking ahead, I hope we can use AT&T Connect to bring our community together," Hardman added.

For more information contact your AT&T Representative or visit us at www.att.com/edu.