

Houston Charter School System Utilizes LifeSize, Microsoft Solutions to Inspire Disadvantaged Students to Succeed

By integrating LifeSize video conferencing endpoints with Microsoft Lync, YES Prep teachers are able to collaborate on lesson plans, improve quality of learning for students

Organization

YES Prep Public Schools, Houston, Texas, USA

YES Prep Public Schools began in 1995 under the name, "Project YES". Its mission was simple: encourage low-income students in Houston to attend college and upon graduation, compete in the global marketplace. Today, YES Prep maintains that vision as a charter school system, supporting over 5,000 students from grades six through 12.

The school district has been extremely successful in its initiatives. As a result of its efforts, 90 percent of its students are first-generation college bound and for the last decade, 100 percent of its graduating seniors have been accepted to four-year colleges. YES Prep was recently recognized on the Oprah Winfrey show as a "groundbreaking charter school". It is evident that YES Prep is truly making a difference in the lives of its students and will continue to do so for years to come.



YES Prep fosters a strong sense of school spirit, which helps inspire disadvantaged students to succeed.



CHALLENGE

Because YES Prep is stretched across 10 campuses throughout one of the largest cities in the US, the district needed a way to bridge the gap and provide much-needed resources to teachers and students.



SOLUTION

YES Prep purchased LifeSize® Team 220™ endpoints to integrate seamlessly with their existing Microsoft® Lync™ UC environment. The district also placed video endpoints on mobile carts to be wheeled from class to class.



RESULTS

Now, teachers utilize video conferencing in a number of ways, from the tele-teach initiative, to first-year mentorship program and lesson plan collaboration, among others.



Challenge

The IT department of YES Prep wanted to best utilize its budget resources in order to provide the highest quality of education possible for the district's students. In classes of 25 students or more, YES Prep employs a system called, "team teach" in which one teacher provides the instructional content of the lesson and the other teacher works individually with students to ensure they understand the material and stay focused. However, finding teachers that fit the content area for each class is a challenge on each individual campus. The district needed a way to bring the teachers into the classroom for their lessons, regardless of their home campus location.

Also, some students required educational resources that were not available at their home school. For example, one young man excelled in mathematics and advanced to Calculus III. However, a lack of time and funds prohibited him from traveling to another site for his classes. YES Prep wanted a way to bring those classes to him, and to any other child with similar goals.

Additionally, YES Prep provides a mentor program for new educators. The district wanted first-year teachers to meet with their mentors for instruction and in turn, for the mentors to observe their classes to provide feedback. Transportation costs quickly began to build as more and more mentors were required to travel to meet with their mentees. The district knew there had to be a better way.

In order to provide all of the necessary resources for students and teachers, the district was challenged to think creatively and find a communications environment that enabled face-to-face interaction with the highest picture quality possible. Video conferencing was their answer.

YES Prep's Key Requirements:

Interoperability with Microsoft: Because the district uses the Microsoft Lync server, their video systems had to be compatible with that UC environment.

Usability: The systems must be easy enough to use on a daily basis and intuitive enough for teachers of varying technical skill levels.

Portability: The video conferencing endpoints must be small in size, so they can be wheeled from classroom to classroom.



"From an IT perspective, our goal is to get data in front of the teachers as soon as possible. There is no better way to accomplish this than with the Microsoft Lync server and LifeSize video conferencing."

– TROY NEAL, DIRECTOR OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY & SUPPORT SERVICES, YES PREP PUBLIC SCHOOLS



Solution

Because the district has used Microsoft Lync since 2008 as its main form of communication (for example, the teachers no longer use PBX, they just use their laptops with Lync), YES Prep required a video conferencing vendor that could easily interoperate with its existing environment. After looking at other competitors' solutions, including Cisco and Polycom, the IT team decided to implement LifeSize, as it was the most cost-effective solution without compromising quality.



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"At YES Prep, it is all about making the most out of the funds and tools we have," said Troy Neal, director of information technology and support services. "We all hear that 'there is no money in education', but that's just not true. There is money; you just have to be wise about how you spend it."

With the help of E-rate grants, YES Prep was able to purchase multiple LifeSize Team 220 video conferencing systems to place throughout its schools. Many of the endpoints have been placed on mobile carts to be wheeled from classroom to classroom for maximum usage.



Results

In order to solve the “team teach” issue that YES Prep was facing, the administrators devised a new program called “team tele-teach” in which teachers could call in to classes over their LifeSize video endpoints and teach the class remotely from their home school. Simultaneously, aides or YES Core members (former students who are now college interns) can work one-on-one with the kids to enrich their learning experiences.

For the mentorship program, teachers can now dial in to a mentees’ classroom to observe their instructional techniques and provide feedback at a later meeting.

By utilizing Microsoft Lync and LifeSize video solutions, teachers can now collaborate on lesson plans and add their own unique spin on traditional practices. In addition, the two solutions are being used in tandem for professional development, staff meetings and technical development. Currently, Microsoft Lync and LifeSize video conferencing systems are being used for these administrative tasks only. However, the district would like to bring Microsoft Lync to the classroom and looks forward to implementing that plan in the coming school year.



“One of our advantages is that most of our teachers are right out of college, which means they are very tech savvy,” said Neal. “The adoption rate of new technology is extremely fast. From an IT perspective, our goal is to get data in front of the teachers as soon as possible. There is no better way to accomplish this than with the Microsoft Lync server coupled with LifeSize video conferencing.”

The technology has also led to unexpected use cases. For instance, in one sixth grade Chinese class, students utilize their language skills by interacting with other classes in China and communicating with them, face-to-face.

“Video conferencing allows our disadvantaged students to receive educational opportunities beyond what they could have ever expected,” said Neal. “The most fulfilling part of my job is watching the students succeed and truly enjoy the process of learning.”



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