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### **Video Conferencing Encourages Collaboration**

**School districts deploy the latest desktop video technology to increase remote interaction.**

Karen D. Schwartz

posted December 2, 2011

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Patrick Plant is somewhat of a visionary when it comes to adopting new technologies to help people learn and collaborate. As chief technology and information officer at Anoka-Hennepin ISD 11 in Coon Rapids, Minn., Plant and his colleagues deployed the district's first rudimentary desktop video conferencing system in the mid-1990s. While the gear was less functional than today's systems, it gave Plant an idea of what was to come.

By 2008, conferencing technology had improved so much that Anoka-Hennepin's team submitted a grant proposal to the state to obtain the seed money to purchase *Cisco System's WebEx Meeting Center* and demonstrate its capabilities to other school districts throughout the state. In 2009, the district implemented WebEx Meeting Center in a secure cloud setting.

Today, desktop video conferencing is part of daily life for both students and staff at Anoka-Hennepin. Instructors use the platform for professional development, while administrators and support staff use it for meetings. In all cases, users can share materials while on the call.

Students use desktop video conferencing for projects with other students in the school or school district, or even with students in other countries. Students who are at home sick can now conference with a teacher to understand lessons missed.

"When you add video and the ability to share documents, it's much closer to being in the same room than a simple call," Plant says. "It opens up a lot more possibilities for interactivity, and that creates a much more

authentic and powerful collaborative experience.”

These are some of the many benefits of desktop video conferencing for schools. In addition, desktop video conferencing provides a cost-effective alternative to room-based systems, which can cost several thousand dollars. A desktop license costs a fraction of that, says Subha Rama, a senior analyst at ABI Research. “And because it reduces travel, it reduces both emissions and costs,” she says. “The savings over a room system can be pretty substantial.”

## Be There in Spirit

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Desktop video conferencing deployment throughout Texas schools has grown significantly in the past several years as a result of rollouts by the state’s 20 Education Service Centers. Each Service Center chooses its own system; some choose Cisco System’s TelePresence Movi, some select *Mirial’s ClearSea* (recently acquired by *Logitech*), and others opt for *Polycom* Desktop Converged Management Application (CMA).

**\$527** Amount saved by using video conferencing to replace three meetings requiring six hours of round-trip car travel per year

SOURCE: Polycom Return on Investment Calculator

Education Service Center Region XIII supports technology for 60 school districts in central Texas and has standardized on Mirial ClearSea, which lets schools turn their computers and smartphones into desktop video conferencing systems. The 2,500 licenses are used throughout the region’s school districts for meetings, professional development, virtual classes and virtual field trips.

Teachers can use desktop video conferencing to attend a course or lecture, while principals can conduct meetings. Users simply click on the ClearSea client on the desktop to initiate a conferencing session. If a user wants to connect to someone who is outside the school district, he or she can ask the Service Center to push a client out to that person.

One of the fastest-growing uses of desktop video conferencing is for virtual field trips. “Our students can go on virtual field trips to many of the museums in Texas,” says Carol Teitelman, coordinator of Region XIII’s distance learning programs. “You’d be surprised how well that works,” she adds. Teachers simply launch the ClearSea client, connect to a room system or mobile unit on the museum end, and project the image on a wall.

Teitelman says the region’s 2,500 licenses are being stretched thin, and she hopes to be able to expand the deployment. “The number of administrators who attend meetings this way alone has at least doubled since this started four years ago,” she says.

## Steps for Success

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Try these pointers for getting the most from desktop video conferencing:

- Seek systems that are standards-based and interoperable with other desktop video conferencing and room systems.
- Consider upgrading network capacity if you plan to use conferencing extensively throughout the district.
- Use high-definition video both on the computer and on the webcam.
- Factor in a budget for training and support.

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