Arkansas School District Pioneers Latest Technology

Cutting-edge Solution Includes Hybrid Recorders, Cloud Service, Web-based Software, IP cameras

Too many school districts put off the decision to install video surveillance until something happens – an alleged assault, a break-in and theft, or even worse, a school shooting. Fortunately, that wasn't the case at the Gentry Public School District in Gentry, Arkansas.

A rural school district in northwestern Arkansas, Gentry Public Schools provides Kindergarten to Grade 12 education to 1,400 students on four campuses.

"The idea of having video surveillance in our schools had been tossed around for several years," said School Superintendent Dr. Randy Barrett. "Shootings in public schools across America and other countries caused us to look at what we were doing to ensure the safety of our students. Nothing like that had ever occurred here, but there were enough incidents elsewhere to finally convince us to stop talking about it and actually do something about it."
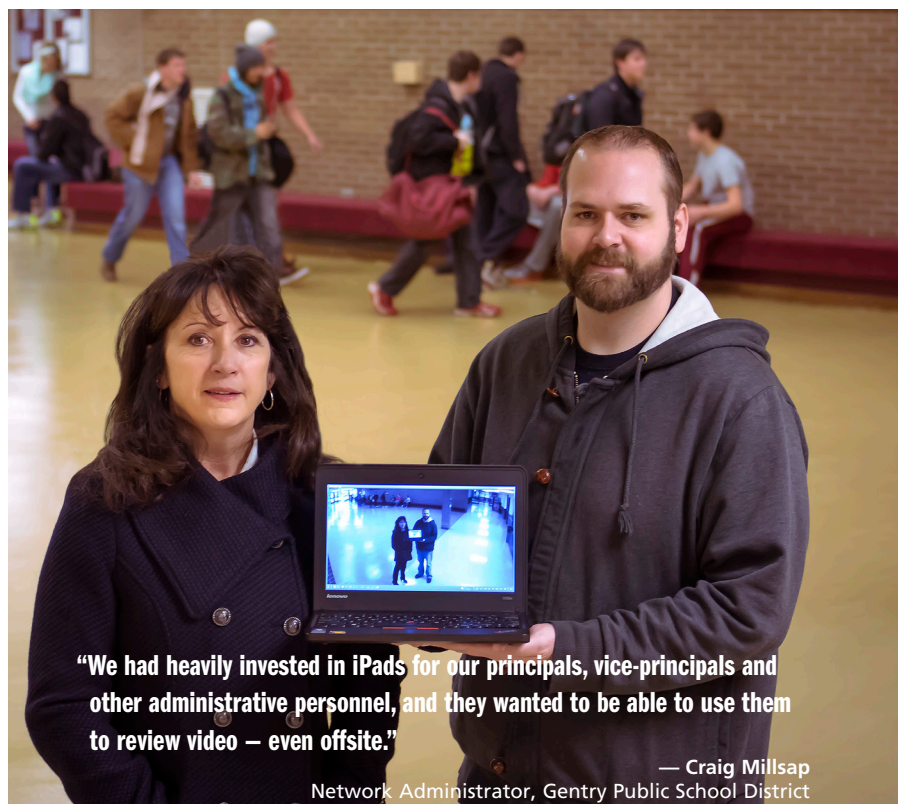
Gentry Public Schools wasn't sure where to start but, sometimes, "things fall into place for unexplained reasons," said Dr. Barrett. "In a classic example of synchronicity, a gentleman from Fleming Network Services walked through the door one morning at the same time that video surveillance was a burning issue for us. We had a good conversation and had an opportunity to see a system they had installed at a regional airport close to us, so we kept going down that path."

A March Networks Certified Solution Provider, Fleming Network Services proposed a cutting-edge solution consisting of March Networks 8000 Series hybrid recorders, web-based Command Enterprise video management software and IP cameras.

"We had no reason to look elsewhere because what we were seeing met all of our needs," said Dr. Barrett. "The fact that Fleming was a TIPS/TAPS member, as we are, also worked out well because there was no need to go through the state's bid process."

TIPS/TAPS is a purchasing co-operative that ensures members like Gentry Public Schools substantial savings through co-operative purchasing. More formally known as the Interlocal Purchasing System, TIPS/TAPS serves public and private school districts, colleges, universities and

"We had heavily invested in iPads for our principals, vice-principals and other administrative personnel, and they wanted to be able to use them to review video – even offsite."

— Craig Millsap
Network Administrator, Gentry Public School District

Judy Winslett, Federal and Curriculum Co-ordinator, and Craig Millsap, Network Administrator, Gentry Public School District, displaying real-time video on a laptop using March Networks Cloud service.

government agencies at the federal, state and municipal levels.

Judy Winslett, the school district's federal and curriculum co-ordinator whose responsibilities include overseeing the district's technology efforts, stressed the important role the school board played in carrying out its mission to provide safe and successful experiences for students. "This was a relatively large project for a district our size, but the board was unanimous in allocating funds for the increased safety of our students," she emphasized.

One of Gentry Public Schools' requirements for a video surveillance system, said IT network administrator Craig Millsap, was the ability to view the cameras on iPads.

"We had heavily invested in iPads for our principals, vice-principals and other administrative personnel, and they wanted to be able to use them to review video – even offsite."

March Networks Cloud service was the perfect solution. Compatible with Apple's iOS, Blackberry, Android and Windows Mobile operating systems, March Networks Cloud requires no router port forwarding, hardware tweaks, fire-wall changes or software downloads.

The Cloud service is ideal for Gentry's lone school resource officer, who is now able to check in on a school from police headquarters, from his cruiser or from anywhere else. In the event of an emergency at any of Gentry's schools, law enforcement will be able to access live video from cameras located in the hallways and cafeterias to safely and expeditiously respond to a situation.

"In our district, all of the administrators — principals, vice-principals and even secretaries — have access to the system," said Millsap. "The secretaries are able to view live video on a monitor while they're sitting at their desk. They are able to switch between several pre-configured groups of cameras depending on the area in or around the exterior of the school they want to see."

Fifteen administrators and secretaries received training from March Networks.

"Setting them up in the system was easy because Command Enterprise is integrated with our Active Directory. That allowed us to use their existing accounts," said Millsap. "I assigned permissions based on their group membership in Active Directory. It

was just perfect. It worked exactly like we wanted it to."

Gentry's four 8000 Series hybrid NVRs record video from 90 Axis IP cameras positioned both inside and outside the schools to cover entrances and parking lots.

In the event of an altercation or damage to school property, it's easy to go into the archives, identify the culprit and take the appropriate remedial action.

Each 8000 Series recorder is equipped with four, 3 TB hard drives, giving Gentry a total of 12 TB of mirrored storage or approximately 30 days of video retention.

To facilitate navigation, Millsap took the time to carefully establish a naming convention for the 90 cameras.

Photography: Patrick Lanford

"Naming them appropriately is important, so you know what you're looking at because one hallway looks the same as another," said Millsap. "In the Cloud client, we also broke it down by building. It was well worth the time."

The system was installed in July 2013 and expanded in October when the school district opened a new Pioneer Activities Complex, a large indoor recreation center with a 50-yard astroturf football field, weight room and other facilities.

The community was very supportive about the school district's decision to install a video surveillance system, said Millsap.

"As a parent myself, it makes me feel a lot better, knowing that we've taken the appropriate steps to create a safe environment for our students." ▼