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Network Video Fortifies Surveillance in Fort Smith Public Schools



Video has long played an essential security role as the Fort Smith Public Schools (FSPS) cope with incidents such as vandalism, theft, and student problems, which are common to the school environment and as the district prepares for crisis management in the event of an emergency such as an armed intrusion or natural disaster. This long-standing use of video surveillance resulted in burdensome “legacy” systems, causing administration to pursue updated surveillance solutions.

Today, with the help of Wren Network Video Solutions, the FSPS information technology department is modernizing the district’s video surveillance systems—systems that are fundamental to creating a safe learning environment for the district’s more than 13,000 students. Ultimately, Wren Network Video Systems will be installed at all 30 district locations, encompassing all school and administrative buildings.

An Abundance of Cameras: A Host of Problems

Providing safe school environments for students to help ensure academic and personal success has been a focus of FSPS for

more than 130 years. The abundance of analog cameras scattered in schools across the district attests to just how seriously administration has viewed security. However, the web of video surveillance systems, with the many different brands of cameras, DVRs, and software purchased and installed by different integrators, became very difficult to maintain. Each occurrence of a problem required a different procedure to be followed and/or a different person to be contacted to address the issue. In addition, the quality of each system depended upon each integrator’s level of experience, knowledge of the school’s objectives, and technical capabilities.

FSPS' IT team consists of six technical professionals with different areas of expertise in wiring, network administration, video, and infrastructure—a relatively small team to support all IT functions for 30 campuses, with multiple buildings per campus. Arnol Shaw, Director of IT, recognized the importance of investing in a video solution that was manageable within the district without completely draining IT resources.

Existing analog cameras at FSPS locations were a drain on limited resources. Without someone to man PTZ cameras, setting them to automatically pivot 24/7, as recommended by the integrator, resulted in constant motion which left to chance whether the cameras recorded the needed video. Additionally, the cameras' motors were not designed to run constantly and they soon wore out, leaving schools with no footage at all. Other systems only had the capability to store video for three or four days.

Go with IP Video; Go with Wren

A 38-year veteran of education, Shaw had been investigating the possibilities for IP video for several years, and the FSPS technology team recognized that IP was the technology of the future. Consistency of applied technologies, equipment, and a single point of contact for support were priorities in considering a system that would meet present and future needs while utilizing existing resources. The process could be streamlined by having network cameras operate from the existing IT network, with the capability of adding cameras as needed. The IT group could troubleshoot many problems without having to call the installer.



Wren VMS Software; Easy to Use, Easy Access

The shift to network video has facilitated the use of video across the district. With Wren VMS Software, personnel at each school can determine how they are going to best utilize the video. The IT department can then configure and distribute the software to meet the individual school's needs.

A task force from FSPS toured other Arkansas school districts to gather ideas and talk with administrators and IT staff about their experiences with network video. During this fact-gathering tour, the task force identified Bentonville High School as a leader in utilizing video surveillance. Bentonville High School was running all IP video off the network, and the video management system they had in use made it easy to retrieve, view, and store video.

It became apparent, in talking with other school districts, that Wren had the hardware, software and services to create an excellent system. Moreover, the system could subsequently be maintained and managed in-house. Wren could also help upgrade analog cameras, saving replacement costs. Since Bentonville was pleased with their system and since the Wren system seemed to meet FSPS needs, the recommendation was made to the Fort Smith Public Schools Crisis Committee to install an IP-based networked video surveillance system by Wren.

In-house Maintenance Saves Time and Money and Maximizes Performance

To begin the process of implementing the Wren system, a four-member team from the FSPS IT department traveled

to Wren's headquarters in Jefferson City, Missouri for the IP Video Solutions Technical Certification Program. With Wren's extensive training course and the flexibility of Wren hardware and software, Fort Smith Public Schools would be able to manage network video without completely throwing out their sizeable investment in analog cameras.

Today, managing video surveillance equipment across the district is far easier and less time consuming. All Wren System cameras are running off the IT network, providing the IT group with visibility to all cameras through Wren VMS Software. The software's "watchdog" feature helps monitor cameras for problems, with its "dashboard" indicating when cameras are not found on the network and when cameras are experiencing problems.

Although some technical support for the hardware requires a call, Wren is the single point of contact, making the process more streamlined than it was previously when the district was dealing with multiple integrators. "Regardless of the issue, we can place a call directly to Wren. Their cameras are durable and dependable. Because the system is network video we can take the first steps toward troubleshooting in-house," commented Shaw.

Wren "Views" can be configured to a school's specific wants and needs. For example, elementary schools may want the secretaries to have Wren VMS Software installed on their PCs so that they can monitor people coming in and out of the building. High schools, on the other hand, may give video access exclusively to principals, assistant principals or other designated personnel who are viewing live video between classes to ensure smooth traffic flow or to watch for problems among students.

Based upon their success to date, Fort Smith Public Schools plans to expand the system by using Wren technologies for new installations. The goal is to upgrade all the previously installed old legacy cameras and to run everything from the Wren VMS Software. "We're still learning, but I see us getting ever-more sophisticated with our applications for video across the school district. Our future focus is to provide prevention, intervention, and crisis response to ensure a safe learning environment for students. Now we're supporting video surveillance systems without taxing our IT resources or spending a great deal of money on outside consultants. Thanks to the Wren system, we can get back to the business of managing IT needs across the district," said Shaw.