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Amador Valley High School Gets A Taste of IP Video



The school recently began exploring the power of network video to help curb students' appetite to snatch food from the cafeteria lines without paying for it. Today, this system is only the beginning of a larger plan to grow the network of IP cameras to ensure student safety, prevent problems among students, and secure school assets.

Educating students since 1923, Amador Valley High School (Amador) in Pleasanton, California has all of the ingredients for a successful school. Demonstrating a commitment to building a community of responsibility and respect, focusing on student academic performance, and taking steps to ensure a safe and secure school, Amador's administration puts every effort toward creating a safe, comfortable learning environment for its students.

While in a relatively quiet, affluent neighborhood, Amador grapples with problems common in schools today: fights among students, petty theft and safety violations. Video surveillance is a powerful tool for any school identifying and investigating these matters. Amador did not have an immediate need for a major, campus-wide system, but

wanted to explore the possibilities for network video in their school. In the course of their research, they found Wren, a provider of video surveillance solutions for more than 25 years. Wren helped Amador and the greater Pleasanton Unified School District (USD) deploy a network video solution that integrated seamlessly with the existing IT network and offered flexible scalability as the school's needs evolved.

» IP Video: Curbing Students' Appetite For Theft

An excellent place to start deploying IP cameras was the food service area, where some students had an appetite for stealing their favorite food items. "In an affluent area, it's not that the kids can't afford the food, but it becomes a

game to some of them to see what they can get away with,” explained Frank Castro, director of child nutrition services at Pleasanton USD. “We have hot and cold food lines where the kids walk through and select their food a la carte, and then proceed to the cashier to pay for it. Without the proper monitoring, food starts to disappear.” Kids were stealing food, slipping it in their backpacks. As a specific site with a clear problem, Pleasanton USD decided to start here when it came to deploying network video.

They installed eight cameras, aimed straight down the line on each side of the two hot and cold food compartments. Initially they monitored the video live, but found it required too much manpower, and with easy-to-use Wren Video Management System (VMS) Software, it is easy to find and view archived video from the specific time and camera needed.

» Key Ingredients: Scalability, Manageability

The investment in IP video was a decision supported by Pleasanton USD’s IT team. Gary Hicklin, director of IT explained, “We had invested a lot of capital in establishing our network infrastructure and wanted to leverage it in every way possible. The decision to go with IP video as opposed to analog would allow us to make better use of our existing assets, to manage and maintain the system more cost-effectively in-house, and ensure better performance of the system.”

While the first IP cameras were installed in the cafeteria, Hicklin knew the system would have the flexibility to grow over time. The eight-camera install in the food services area was just a platform for setting up network video and adding additional cameras across multiple campuses as needed. All video is managed centrally via Wren VMS Software, providing users with easy access to video they need. The software has unlimited potential for scalability and can manage cameras across multiple locations. A true enterprise solution, Wren VMS Software makes it easy to view and compare video across multiple locations and to manage users’ interaction with different cameras and video depending on their particular role and needs.

Castro noted the usability of Wren VMS Software: “I can select cameras and drag and drop them into panes to display live video. I’m a proficient PC user, and find VMS to be very intuitive and easy to use based on any user’s standard-level computer skills.”

» IP Video Serves Up Results

Upon installation of the cameras, Amador saw a drop in fights in the cafeteria line and theft, as the students became aware that they were being monitored. “The thrill is the possibility of being caught, not an assurance of being caught. Constant

surveillance and the high probability of being caught take the sport out the game for less intent students. For other students who continue to commit infractions even knowing the cameras are there, it makes it much easier to catch them and take disciplinary action,” said Castro.

By using data generated at the register and inventory counts of food in combination with the video, the staff can easily identify and investigate potential problems. In most cases, the cafeteria manager will come up short on cash compared with the amount of food that that was used that day. If this is the case, Castro can simply pull up video of the kids going through the line and see if food was taken.

Video is used in other instances as well. At one point a complete compartment of food was ruined when a student poured milk all over the container and its contents. Castro recalled, “We wanted to verify if this was done on purpose or if it was an accident. By reviewing the video, we were able to determine who was responsible, determine whether or not it was intentional, and take the appropriate disciplinary action.” Castro notes the importance of absolute precision when collecting evidence before taking disciplinary action. “These situations can get highly litigious and it’s important to build a rock-solid case or you risk significant liability,” he said. Video provides the ability to see the actual event, making it difficult to dispute the facts of what happened.

» Limited Deployment Whets Pleasanton’s Appetite For More

Today, this system is only the beginning of a larger plan to continue to grow the network of IP cameras to be used to ensure student safety, to prevent problems among students, and to secure school assets. Wren network cameras have continued to serve up success. Expansion of the system is imminent. “Right now, we are growing the system as needed, usually to target specific problem areas,” commented Hicklin. Most recently, portable classrooms were the subject of theft. Cameras are currently being installed there to curtail or prosecute the problem.

Next steps also include sharing video with law enforcement. “It’s in our interest to help the police be as efficient as they can when preparing for and responding to emergencies at the school. With so many local budget cuts, the police department has to do more with fewer resources. We certainly understand that kind of expectation and video helps both the school and law enforcement accomplish the maximum possible results with the fewest possible resources,” noted Hicklin.

The positive experience at Amador has merely whet Pleasanton Unified School district’s appetite for more network video.