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Chris Ross
Network Administrator,
West Chester Area School District

School District Implements Cost-Effective Remote Access with FirePass from F5 Networks

Industry

Education

Challenges

- Upgrade secure, remote network access services for staff and students
- Stay within the school district budget

Solution

FirePass® SSL VPN 4100

Benefits

- Robust VPN solution at 50 percent less cost
- Broad, affordable application support
- Secure, application-specific access
- Simplified IT administration

Overview

With 16 schools, two administrative sites, and 13,500 students and staff members, the West Chester Area School District is one of the largest districts in Pennsylvania. The district found the costs of upgrading its Citrix-based virtual private network (VPN) prohibitive. Instead, the school district implemented FirePass® SSL VPN from F5 at less than half of what the Citrix upgrade would have cost, and with greatly expanded capabilities.

Challenges

West Chester Area School District serves approximately 12,000 students in grades kindergarten through 12, over a 75-square-mile area in central Chester County, Pennsylvania. To connect remotely to network-based applications while working from home or from shared computers at district locations, instructional and administrative staff used to use a Citrix-based VPN solution.

In 2005, the district upgraded its server operating system, which also prompted a look at upgrading the district's Citrix VPN solution. “We wanted to be able to use a web interface for terminal sessions rather than the full Citrix client,” says Chris Ross, Network Administrator for the district. “To do this, we needed to upgrade to Citrix Presentation Server.”

Ross says that the costs of renewing the Citrix client access and server software licenses and

support agreements, would have cost approximately U.S. \$40,000. In addition, “the features and capabilities we needed were quite limited compared with the cost of the upgrade,” says Ross.

The district wanted to provide remote access to network-based applications through terminal services to a limited number of staff members, as well as access to file shares for all staff and students, but this would have required the purchase of additional Citrix client licenses.

“With Citrix, we would have had to provide terminal server access to everyone in order to give people access to file shares. This meant a huge additional cost when all that these people need is the ability to upload and download files,” says Ross. “It was more than we needed, and more than the district could afford.” Ross also says that continuing on the Citrix platform would have required the purchase of three additional servers.

Solution

The district thoroughly evaluated remote access solutions from a number of vendors and chose the F5 FirePass appliance recommended by its longstanding technology partner Comm Solutions (www.commsolutions.com). “The lower cost of FirePass was definitely a factor, but we also found that FirePass's support for accessing file shares was superior,” says Ross.





"The district is a 10-year customer of ours, and we knew they needed a rock-solid solution," says William Buckalew, Vice President of Operations at Comm Solutions.

Unlike traditional IPSec VPNs, FirePass enables the district to provide users with web-based VPN access without requiring any client software to be installed on the users' computers.

It also includes support for terminal services, providing secure and easy access to network-based applications and file shares from any location. Staff and students simply open a web browser, navigate to the district's remote access web site, log in with a user name and password, and are then granted secure access to network-based file shares and applications via the SSL VPN tunnel.

In addition, once a user logs in to FirePass, the device verifies the user's identity against the user's group membership in the district's Active Directory® service, ensuring that the access is only granted to appropriate resources. For example, students and staff logging on will have access to their home folders containing their personal files as well as hyperlinks to commonly used resources such as the library system, web-based e-mail, or homework help.

Benefits

As a result of its implementation of F5's FirePass, the West Chester Area School District has realized significant cost savings and has expanded its service offerings. And because it requires no client software, FirePass is easy for the IT staff to support and maintain.

Improved Services at Less Than Half the Price

By implementing FirePass instead of upgrading its Citrix environment, the district has saved a significant amount of money. "At the time we considered renewing our Citrix licenses," says Ross, "we discovered that purchasing FirePass would cost us less than half of what we would have paid to continue with Citrix." FirePass enables reliable and secure remote access to important resources, such as a frequently used, server-based application that enables multiple special education staff members to contribute to Individualized Education Program (IEP) documents from any computer, inside or outside of the district's firewall.

Reduced Server and Support Costs

With the FirePass device, the district is also able to provide students with remote access to file shares at no additional cost. "In our old environment, students and staff were unable to access portals or file shares because of the prohibitive costs of the additional client licenses required for terminal services," says Ross. "With FirePass, access to terminal services is included—and we only had to purchase one additional server versus the three we would have had to buy with Citrix."

Ross also says that because FirePass enables internal users to access and use the IEP application over the network rather than on their local hard drives, support time is minimized "because we don't need to install the application on as many computers."

Secure, Application-specific Access

With FirePass, the IT staff are able to define and maintain access controls on FirePass and allow FirePass to grant, on a user-by-user basis, access to specific network-based applications and sites. For example, the company that handles the district's telephone system has remote access to the server containing the phone system applications. Also, the district's HVAC management team can access the energy management server remotely.

"Last winter on the coldest night of the year, thanks to FirePass, the HVAC manager was able to log in to the system from home. He found that the boilers were off at one of our elementary schools and turned them back on, saving the water pipes from freezing," says Ross.

Additionally, even though no client software is required, FirePass can invoke and execute security processes or access controls to ensure a virus-free environment before allowing users to log on. Non-compliant client computers can be redirected to a quarantine server in order to bring the client to the correct policy level.

Simplified IT Administration

The FirePass product has been a boon to the network administration group in that staff can connect to district systems remotely, and after hours. "We can reset people's passwords if we have to, restore files, even restore entire applications, if, for example, we encounter problems during a software upgrade. With some of our staff living as far as an hour's drive away, this capability is very valuable," says Ross.

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