Too Much Success: When Growth Causes Technology Problems
A Managed IT Services Case Study from New York's LaSalle Academy

Schools closing. Adjacent institutions merging—These are the headlines people are accustomed to seeing when it comes to Catholic schools. The opposite is happening at LaSalle Academy, the 259-year-old Christian Brothers school on New York's Lower Eastside.

When the school's success story ushered in an IT crisis, my company, tmg-emedia, was right in the middle of it. Here's what happened, and the lessons everyone learned.

The Problem: New Money Meets Old Infrastructure

After years of contraction, LaSalle took steps to buck the Catholic-school trend of closure and merger. New leadership, new administration, and new fundraising quickly paid off in increased enrollment and reinvigorated donors.

One result: A large gift to equip students with tablets, starting with an incoming freshman class.

As many an IT professional knows, an influx of resources on top of years-long under-investment can result in disaster.

With scores of new tablets arriving, here's what the LaSalle challenges looked like:

- A legacy IT staff with no experience in even medium-scale system upgrades.
- A cobbled-together network in an environment not directly under LaSalle control (leased classroom space).
- A hastily chosen telecom vendor that didn't deliver on time and disputed the contract.
- Inadequate Wi-Fi and cables throughout the buildings.
- Phones not working.
- A fixed timeframe to address it all—Summer break.

In the midst of all of this, the New York Times showed up to do include LaSalle in a piece on the use of technology in the classroom.

"The entrance of TMG-emedia into the academic / technology lifeblood of La Salle Academy can be counted as one of the main reasons why LaSalle Academy has risen from the ashes over the last several years," said Dr. Catherine Guerriero, President of La Salle Academy. "They have singlehandedly brought our technological capacity, service, training and literal and figurative 'technology bandwith' screaming out of the Stone Age and into the present. We now have a fully functioning technology school, with Smartboards in every classroom, with tablets in every student's bookbag, and with the clean and cyber-secure processes that go hand-in-hand with a seamless academic transition. Beyond the wiring, and the expertise in this arena, La Salle Academy benefitted from the hands-on approach to 'fixing' our issues by an organization that understood our needs both as a non-for-profit AND as an institution of higher education. They worked with and around the particular set of complex challenges that come with these baselines,

and succeeded for us – and our students – where others would have failed. We owe them a great debt of gratitude."
said Dr. Catherine Guerriero, president of LaSalle.

The Solution

LaSalle reached out to us for help. The very first thing that happened was an honest conversation. We worked through what was possible, what was impossible, and what was in the "maybe" category.

We decided upon a "critical path"—what was absolutely imperative for student arrival right after Labor Day, such as tablet set-up and functional phones. Then we decided upon medium-term critical path—what might be possible over Christmas break. And finally, full remediation to happen over the following summer.

The plan included compromises, such as intra-classroom Wi-Fi usage coordination so as not to overwhelm the limited bandwidth.

Over 18 months, LaSalle reached a much better place:

- Tablet rollout and management procedures.
- New servers and switches.
- Upgraded network including Wi-Fi access points, cabling and security.
- Formal technology plan and backup plan.
- Project management procedures and tracking.
- Replacement telecom vendor.

Lessons Learned

As often happens with really great clients, we learned mutual lessons.

For us as IT consultants, the LaSalle project was a good reminder in the following lessons:

- Sometimes you have to be nimble. When funding arrives, you must take action!
- Honesty and trust are essential. If there's bad news to deliver, do it quickly and thoroughly. Like fish or houseguests, bad news doesn't improve with time.
- Every client represents a dynamic ecosystem with its own rules and rhythms. Schools are a great refresher on this because they are so different from the average business environment.

"The day the school reached out to us we were honored to assist. Bridging the gap between technology and education was our goal and developing a plan to facility education remains to be our focus. Therefore, we developed a plan back then that continues to evolve today," said Shari Lowsky, tmg-emedia vice president for managed IT services.

LaSalle agrees that many businesses could profit from their experiences.

Dr. Guerriero shared her list of lessons:

- Rip off the band aid. Act quickly. Don't keep hoping that vendor is going to work out or really the server can last another year.
- Identifying "critical path" is key. Not every "need" is a "need now."
- No one IT person can "do it all," especially when it comes to largescale change. Complementary skillsets are required such as networking, project management, and server setup.
- With good communication, end users will adapt, even if the experience is rocky.
- Marshall resources ahead of time. Know your "steady state" IT team or person and who can be called when the unknown crops up.