



Enriching the Early Education Experience with Networking and Applications Hosting

About Learning Care Group, Inc.

Learning Care Group is the second largest for-profit early education and child care provider in North America. Its more than 1,100 corporate and franchise owned schools encompass five brands that include The Children's Courtyard, Childtime Learning Centers, La Petite Academy, Montessori Unlimited and Tutor Time Child Care/Learning Centers. Each school offers families a wide spectrum of instructional philosophies, core curricula and learning environments for children aged six weeks to 12 years. Through acquisitions and organic expansion, Learning Care Group has built an organization of more than 22,000 employees and has the capacity to serve close to 167,000 children in the U.S. and internationally.

Situation

Learning Care Group wants to leverage its collective resources to help provide children with an enhanced learning experience and a wider range of programs than would be possible in independent schools. The company is especially interested in maximizing the time that staff has to engage directly with children and parents, while supporting teachers with a fully-integrated curriculum and a broad array of learning tools. Managing such a large number of schools profitably also requires Learning Care Group to standardize on certain core processes and systems across the organization, without needlessly burdening directors with administrative detail.

Solution

To deliver on its vision, Learning Care Group directly supports its teachers and directors with a slate of centralized applications and teaching resources that are hosted in two AT&T Internet Data Centers. By streamlining day-to-day management tasks, the directors are free to spend more time in the classroom, while enabling consistent administrative approaches across the organization. The applications are accessible via standard browsers and high-speed remote access connections, greatly simplifying the IT requirements at each location. The Group's IT staff is able to focus on supporting applications that help teachers teach, rather than monitoring servers and the network.

Crayons, Paints and Broadband

In North America, early education and child care is a highly diverse and fragmented marketplace. The vast majority of sites operate as independent facilities that range from small in-home providers to church- and community-run centers. There are also commercial schools with a local or regional presence. Learning Care Group is one of a handful of companies that operates large numbers of schools on a national scale.

Learning Care Group Facts

- **Business Needs**
Create an exceptional child and parent experience at its early education and child care facilities; standardize processes and resources for greater efficiency
- **Networking Solution**
High-speed access to core enterprise applications centrally hosted at AT&T Data Centers
- **Business Value**
Less administrative burden on local staff allowing more time to be spent in the classroom; more efficient processes and richer curriculum support
- **Industry Focus**
Early childhood education and child care
- **Size**
Over 1,100 schools; 22,000 employees

Headquartered in Michigan, the schools are affiliated with one of five distinct brands which vary in their particular emphasis, their approach to learning and education, and the types of services and programs available. Yet all share a common foundation from the level of cleanliness to the certification of teachers. Knowledge regarding licensing requirements is readily distributed to ensure that all regulations are met. As Learning Care Group sees it, the big opportunity for a larger organization lies in offering parents and children a level of quality and resources that would be difficult to deliver in a school that runs entirely on its own.

"It's also about perfecting all the fundamentals of running a school, applying them consistently in every facility, and capitalizing on all the know-how and experience throughout our schools," said Khris Hruska, Director of Technical Services. "Ultimately, it all comes down to having a parent visit a school, feeling an instant connection with the staff, seeing the richness and energy of our environment, and getting that comfort factor."

That focus on the student and parent experience is in fact what guides the Group's overall technology strategy. In addition to addressing the myriad of details involved in running its schools, the goal is to help directors be more effective and efficient managers, and enable teachers to create a more stimulating classroom environment.

In fact, to make sure that the Group's IT staffers fully understand the type of environment they are supporting, Hruska regularly has his staff spend time in the schools to see first hand what directors and teachers do all day. "When an IT technician sits in a room surrounded by energetic, talkative three-year olds, they can appreciate how transparent and attainable their technology must be in that environment."

The majority of the schools utilize a premises-based IP VPN network that is equipped with a remote access connection, such as DSL, geared to that particular location. Other locations depend on private connections via frame relay. The services are provided and managed for Learning Care Group by AT&T. This enables the schools to tap into all of the necessary corporate applications and systems that are hosted in AT&T Internet Data Centers. An array of value-added tools and resources are provided that are geared to enhancing the everyday experience of students and their families.

As recent growth had been largely through acquisition, the standardization of the network has played an important role. "Being able to get the new locations that we have acquired or recently built into a standardized environment allows them to take advantage of some of these tools and immediately become part of our family," said Hruska.

Supporting the Business of Classrooms

To handle the management and administrative side of the business, Learning Care Group relies on core enterprise applications such as human resources functions and email. Local directors are provided with ready-made tools for tackling virtually all their back-office tasks in minimum time. "They get everything from newsletters to policies and procedures to help run their schools," said Hruska. "There are guides to help them hire and manage their staff."

In addition to enabling tight management across the entire Group, these administrative applications have been designed to liberate local directors from excessive 'heads-down' time and enable them to concentrate on building relationships with students and parents. "We want our directors to spend their days interacting with the children and teachers at their school," said Hruska, "not locked in the office fussing with accounting tasks."

Learning Care Group's own Next Generation Application (NGA) serves as the central repository for all student records and information with such details as billing, immunization records and bus assignments. "It is really a historical perspective of the parents and the children at that school," said Hruska. For families that have to move out of the area, it is an added plus. "All of that information is available for the next director in their new city so that the family can easily be integrated back into the child care experience."

The next step will be to provide a secure portal for parents that will allow them to keep up with classroom news, special events and activities, exchange notes with staff and even pay their monthly bills online.

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Sharing Knowledge and Ideas

To allow teachers to share information and take advantage of the knowledge across all of its brands, Learning Care Group also provides a comprehensive intranet portal. "We want to enable teachers to go to a computer and find activities related to the class that day," said Hruska. "If they are doing a lesson on dinosaurs they can find detailed information and a variety of related activities, giving them a tremendous amount of flexibility in programming their curriculum."

"Going forward we plan to offer training on demand for the directors and the teachers via our network," said Hruska. "Whether it's recorded teleconferences, PowerPoint presentations or streaming video, the ability to get everybody coordinated and united is really going to be key for us."

Hruska's team is also deploying PCs throughout the schools for children to use in the classroom. Instead of simply installing a selection of random applications, Learning Care Group is working to develop its own software around the curriculum. "Being able to deploy it, support it and update it as different trends and ideas come across schools is really important," said Hruska. "It isn't feasible to go up and touch our hundreds of locations so a central distribution point is critical. That's one of the reasons why the hosting capability is such a huge benefit because we can easily push the applications out to the desktop."

Keeping the Focus on the Classroom

With a relatively lean IT staff to support all of its locations and applications, Hruska made the strategic decision to have AT&T manage all the local connectivity to the network as well as host the critical enterprise applications. "It was much more efficient to turn that all over to AT&T," he said. "It means we can manage our entire network with just five people, instead of a dozen or more. We're focusing on the business, not on the nuts and bolts of hosting and network operations.

"We're depending on AT&T to handle many of the day-to-day tasks we would otherwise have to manage ourselves," Hruska added. "We never realized a company like AT&T could keep up with us. They are more nimble than we expected."

With its focus always on the children and their learning experience, Learning Care Group is now experimenting with wireless networking in its schools. Using the Galileo online preschool assessment tool, their teachers can evaluate the progress and needs of each individual student. The goal is to allow teachers and staff to input these student evaluations on the fly during the day. These inputs are integral to ensuring children are developing and learning at the right pace.

"The biggest thing for us in IT is to help schools make everything as transparent as possible for the families. We are all advocates for what they do."

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