

# Supporting today's school ICT environments

By Brett North, National Manager – Operations & Services at Computelec

**Technology has become essential to delivering better educational outcomes, so a school's ICT infrastructure has become mission-critical. However, the end of DER funding has limited resources for supporting it – at the same time as user demands are increasing. ICT leaders from three very different schools talk about how they are meeting these challenges.**

Under the previous Federal Government's four-year Digital Education Revolution (DER) program, schools were able to invest significantly in technology and internet bandwidth. That funding has now ceased, so schools are challenged in finding effective and affordable ways to continue delivering 1-to-1 student access to technology and a secure infrastructure to optimise faster internet.

Education technology changed forever as the result of DER funding assistance, according to Paul Bothma, Director of ICT at Brisbane's Cannon Hill Anglican College (CHAC). "With schools now confronting the end of DER, many are considering BYOD programs as a means of integrating cost-effective technology into their educational programs," Bothma says. "High-speed internet and the maturing of cloud technology offer opportunity for innovation – but also very real challenges in delivering security, management and support within a relatively constrained financial environment."

## Coping with the pace of change

Jocelyn Martin, Business Manager at Canberra's Radford College, identifies 'the pace of change' as a key challenge for technology strategy within school environments. "Users have high expectations of ICT today. I try to avoid reacting prematurely to a new technology or sticking rigidly to a defined strategic plan. Things change so quickly."

"Teachers go to conferences and see products which they then think they must have," she says. "The challenge is thinking strategically through all the options out there to choose the most appropriate for our school. That takes time and expertise we don't always have."

"ICT is highly prone to fads. We need to sort through the hype, then work out what's going to be useful in our school environment. Helping us make and prioritise the right choices is where a trusted technology partner is invaluable."



## Cannon Hill Anglican College, Brisbane

With around 970 students and 135 staff spanning Prep to Year 12, CHAC has three full-time ICT staff led by Director of ICT Paul Bothma. The college engaged education specialist Computelec to manage its network and server infrastructure.

"Given the current skills shortages in the Australian ICT sector, we compete with better-funded commercial organisations to employ the necessary expertise," Bothma says. "One of the benefits of outsourcing services and skills via a managed services solution is that it's a more cost-effective way of accessing a rich pool of skills and experience to complement those of our ICT staff. It also allows closer strategic alignment of our focus on supporting pedagogical outcomes and achievement."

## The value of education expertise

An emerging trend in school ICT is engaging third-party support services. These can complement internal ICT staff and offer them access to high-level technology skills and solutions otherwise unavailable. Under such an arrangement, schools can eliminate many mundane monitoring and maintenance tasks, allowing more time for strategic initiatives, customised configuration and personal support.

While many organisations deliver managed services solutions for small-to-medium sized organisations, Bothma says CHAC placed value on a partner demonstrating commitment to education when following this route.

“Schools face unique technology challenges and every vendor will tell you they have the right solution,” he says. “This means it’s critical to deal with a partner intimate knowledge of the vertical and runs on the board in implementing education solutions that make a difference”.

Martin sees value from managed services delivery in real-time performance monitoring and rapid response to issues. Operating school infrastructure at optimum levels enables both students and staff to get the best from technology investments, providing a better educational experience.

“Our managed services provider gives us confidence in ICT classroom delivery with less downtime,” she says. “Having a partner with strong vendor relationships generates confidence that our critical security and back-up requirements are taken care of.”

“Our managed services partner has provided a highly resilient network that delivers valuable performance, reliability and scope for future change. They monitor all our servers, back-up and patching – previously mundane, repetitious tasks distracting us from strategic improvements.”

## Getting the best out of school ICT

Greg Henshaw, Deputy Principal at North Sydney Girls High School (NSGHS) needed a clear picture of the school’s ICT infrastructure, and whether it could meet a defined strategy for a secure platform supporting a broad range of systems and applications – both school-owned and those under its BYOD policy.

Having invested significant resources in its network and servers, it wanted to explore options for moving to cloud computing, allowing staff and students to access desktops and applications from anywhere, on any device.

Following audit and review of its ICT infrastructure, NSGHS opted for managed services. The audit showed too much time, money and energy spent on basic infrastructure management and maintenance – with not enough allocated to strategy and development.

“There was some initial resistance from our internal team, who’d been doing a great job with what we had,” Henshaw says. “But this diminished as the relationship with our support services partner developed, and they realised this was an effective way to introduce objectivity, alternative opinions and innovation to our operations.”



## Radford College, Canberra

Radford College is an independent Anglican coeducational school with over 1,600 students and close to 200 teachers. **Business Manager Jocelyn Martin** says her strategy has been to focus on building front-of-house service and support, so was interested in leveraging third-party managed services to ensure the college’s infrastructure is secure and reliable.

“Our ICT staff never had the capacity to effectively support and maintain the large number of devices the school now uses,” she says. “Our knowledge base was spread too thin and, so we’d prefer to build our capabilities as an ICT services hub for our customers.”

“It makes sense for us to focus on strategy and service, while having the back end managed remotely under best-practice processes. We use Computelec, which specialises in education. We’re now developing our people to assist with both minor and more sophisticated ICT issues, leaving back-end management to our managed services partner.”

## An end to fire fighting

All three ICT leaders claim improvement in the skills base of their own staff, by tapping into in education technology experience and expertise. They also cite benefits reaped from managed services, having to no longer continually fight fires in their network and server infrastructures.

“Costs have been reduced but, more importantly, we’ve achieved the higher goal of proactive technical support,” Martin says. “A managed solution with service level guarantees is much less costly than bringing in help for every incident. We now often only learn about issues on receiving our monthly activity report, showing they were fixed before they created dramas.”

Bothma echoes the assurance from expert 24x7 monitoring of his infrastructure, and ready access to remote support when required. “Specialist advice on collaborative projects to address performance issues and identify infrastructure deficiencies has been of great benefit,” he says. “I now get a monthly report on issues we experience, and monthly meetings allow us to work together proactively to improve delivery and reliability of our ICT services.”

Meanwhile, Henshaw needs no further convincing that leveraging a managed services provider with remote monitoring capability has proven great value to the school. He says it has achieved a 60% annual saving on its previous onsite support arrangement and experienced 100% reliability of its local infrastructure.

## The bottom line on Managed ICT Services for schools

Managed services providing remote monitoring of onsite infrastructure are by no means a new concept, but schools have typically managed their own environments. This is changing as information technology matures to become mission-critical to teaching and learning – especially since DER funding exploded numbers of devices under management and fast internet access increased complexity of network.

Eliminating the burden of managing core infrastructure through managed services allows schools to focus on improving ICT service delivery to improve education outcomes – providing an extended, collaborative engineering team that can transfer knowledge to internal school ICT staff.



## North Sydney Girls High School, Sydney

NSGHS is an academically selective, public high school for girls with over 900 students, located at Crows Nest on Sydney’s Lower North Shore.

According to **Deputy Principal Greg Henshaw**, “We were looking to build a new platform, but were far too close to objectively envision where we wanted to end up. We engaged Computelec to audit our infrastructure, establish performance benchmarks and share ideas on how to deliver the best outcomes for our school.”

NSGHS subsequently opted for a managed infrastructure service providing the comfort of guaranteed security, back-up and stability, introducing new expertise to help with enhancements and configurations to facilitate virtualised desktops and a BYOD environment.

