

Keep ICT support in-house or use a better-resourced third party?

As schools confront the end of DER funding for ICT, three, in Brisbane, Canberra and North Sydney, have opted for third-party support, **ET Staff**



The BYOD genie is out of the bottle; exciting new cloud based learning platforms and resources seem to be announced almost weekly. It's all there and accessible on Macs, PCs, iPads and Android tablets, Android smartphones and iPhones... and they all need to work together on the school's intranet – and connect reliably and fast with the internet.

For many schools, contracting out ICT support to a third party can be a cost effective and reliable alternative. The thinking goes: why not eliminate much of the mundane monitoring and maintenance tasks and spend more time on strategic direction, customised configuration and personal support?

Cannon Hill Anglican College in Brisbane, Radford College in Canberra and North Sydney

Girls High School have passed management of their school's ICT operations to long-established ICT education supplier Computelec.

With more than 850 students from prep to Year 12, and 120 staff, Cannon Hill (CHAC) in Brisbane's eastern suburbs has three full time IT people. According to Paul Bothma, Director of ICT, the recently concluded DER program has changed education technology forever.

"Many schools are having to consider BYOD programs as a means of integrating cost-effective technology into their educational programs," Bothma said. "With high speed internet and the maturing of cloud technology there is opportunity for innovation but also very real challenges in security, management and support."

Under constant reactive pressure from

technical issues, CHAC had found it hard to focus on strategy, with little time left to contemplate solutions and find ways to get the best out of existing technology and future investments.

"Meeting these challenges required a significant investment in ICT infrastructure in a relatively constrained financial environment," he said. "We also faced the difficulty of competing for staff against better funded organisations.

"Every hardware and software vendor will tell you they have the right solution. Therefore, it is critical to deal with a partner that intimately knows the vertical and has runs on the board in implementing education solutions.

"I get a monthly report of every issue we have, and monthly meetings allow us to work proactively towards eliminating similar occurrences in the future."

For Jocelyn Martin, Business Manager at Radford College in Canberra 'the pace of change' is the key technology challenge within the school environment. The College is an independent Anglican coeducational school, with over 1600 students and close to 200 teachers.

"I think there are quite high expectations from users about what ICT can do and its availability," Martin said. "One of the things that I try to avoid is reacting prematurely to a new technology or sticking rigidly to a defined strategic plan. Things change so quickly.

"Teachers will go off to conferences and see products which they then think they have to have. The challenge is that we need to think through all the options and choose the appropriate solutions based on what is best for our school. This takes time and expertise that we don't always have."

Martin said that her strategy has been to focus on building 'front of house' service and support and this led to her interest in contracting with a third party services provider to ensure the college's infrastructure is secure and operating reliably.

"Our IT staff never had the capacity to effectively support and maintain the large number of devices in use at the school," Martin said. "Our knowledge base was spread too thin.

As a business manager, she sees value for the school in real time performance monitoring and rapid response to issues when they occur.

"It makes sense for us to focus on strategy

and service while having the back-end managed remotely. We are developing our people to be able to assist with ICT issues, while leaving the majority of back end management to our managed services partner.

“What Computelec has brought to the table is a highly resilient network that delivers valuable performance, reliability and scope for change in the future. The support services engagement monitors all our servers, back-up and patching. Previously, these were mundane, repetitious tasks that kept us distracted from strategic improvements.”

Greg Henshaw is Deputy Principal at North Sydney Girls High School (NSGHS), a 900-student, academically selective school in Crows Nest, Sydney. He said he was looking to establish a clear picture of what the school's ICT infrastructure looked like and whether it was capable of supporting its defined strategic direction: to have a secure platform that could support a broad range of systems and applications.

Significant resources had been invested in back-end network and servers over the years but the school also wanted to explore the possibility of moving to a cloud-computing model with

access for staff and students from anywhere and on any device.

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

One of the audit outcomes showed that too much time, money and energy were being spent on basic infrastructure management and maintenance, with not enough allocated to strategy and development.

“There was quite a bit of resistance at first from the internal team, who had been doing a great job with what we had, but this diminished over time as the relationship developed and they realised that this was an effective way to introduce objectivity, alternative opinions and innovation to our operations.”

All three schools said they have reaped many benefits from their managed services engagements through no longer having to ‘fight fires’ in their network and server infrastructures and the confidence that has come from 24x7 monitoring of their infrastructure, with

additional remote support when required. The skills base of their staff has also improved through exposure to Computelec's expertise.

For Radford College's Martin, lower support costs have been welcome, while the higher goal of being proactive in technical support has been achieved by avoiding time consuming emergency repairs and trouble-shooting.

“We no longer find out by default when things are not working. Instead, we often we don't find out about them at all until we receive our monthly activity report showing issues that have been fixed before they created dramas,” she said.

NSGHS's Henshaw adds that he needs no further convincing that leveraging a managed services provider with remote monitoring capability has provided value for money. There has been a 60 per cent annual saving compared to the previous on-site support arrangement. In addition, he said the school has experienced 100 per cent reliability with its local infrastructure.

Information about the cost savings, operational efficiencies and performance improvement that can be achieved by having core ICT infrastructure and support externally managed is available at www.computelec.com.au.

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ABC Splash brings arts and cultural riches into the classroom

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Innovation department has announced new partnerships for education portal ABC Splash, with Australia's leading cultural institutions, including the National Archives of Australia, Museum of Contemporary Art (Sydney), Australian War Memorial, The National Portrait Gallery and National Museum of Australia. The partnerships will enable selected content from the institutions' exhibitions and collections to be accessed by teachers and students through the education site www.splash.abc.net.au.

Using ABC Splash, students can journey into rarely seen archival documents, artefacts and artworks, specially curated to bring to life their day-to-day lessons. Presented as digi-books, these historical and artistic gems offer first-hand insight into some of Australia's most significant cultural moments.

Highlights include the ethereal digital portrait of Cate Blanchett from the National Portrait Gallery and the poignant artifacts of an ANZAC Soldier and Cold War era cartoons from the Australian War Memorial. Other cultural treasures include the intricate and complex string figures of the Yirrkala artists from the collection at the Museum of Contemporary Art and a facsimile of a mysterious handprint and confidential cabinet minutes from the vaults of the National Archives of Australia.

Further partnerships with more of Australia's leading institutions, including the National Museum of Australia, will see more content added over the coming months.

Bell Shakespeare is also creating cultural content for ABC Splash, bringing the Bard's work to life in digital format for a new generation of students. Bell Shakespeare has created *Shakespeare Unbound*, a video



Mark Scott ABC MD at the MCA

series of key speeches from Shakespearean plays. The videos will be paired with commentaries from actors that unpack the meaning of the work in a way that is relevant for Australian students. The first Bell Shakespeare clips will be released on ABC Splash in July 2014.

ABC Director of Innovation, Angela Clark, said: “ABC Splash is bringing a wealth of information into the classroom: from interactive maths games to history apps, science and the arts. By creating a universal and free digital learning resource we are able to empower both teachers and students, giving them the materials to make learning interactive and relevant for today's digital world.”

splash.abc.net.au/digibooks