Manitou Springs School District Safely Filters Apple Devices at School, Home — and Everywhere Else

Manitou Springs School District 14 in Manitou Springs, Colorado, is a small-town school district with big technology plans. With 1,458 students across four school sites — two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school — the district has implemented a one-to-one iPad initiative for grades five through twelve. Students in grades four and below have the opportunity to develop their burgeoning digital skills with hundreds of Mac computers and laptops at their disposal.

With such a mobile environment, MSSD14's IT staff knew that powerful SSL decryption, as well as comprehensive mobile filtering and reporting, would be critical to the success of their technology initiatives and student safety. That's why district staff chose the Lightspeed Systems Web Filter.

Solving SSL Decryption

MSSD14 District Tech Zach Miller relies on the Lightspeed Systems Web Filter on a daily basis. An employee of MSSD14 since 2013, Zach has spent many years over-seeing content filtering solutions in K-12 schools. When he began working with the Lightspeed solution at MSSD14, he was immediately impressed with its handling of encrypted traffic.

"No one other than Lightspeed has made a respectable attempt at SSL decryption," Zach recalls. This was a "huge" factor in the district's decision to choose Lightspeed's Web Filter, he says.

Like many school district staffs, MSSD14's was blindsided when Google, Yahoo and other major Web entities began encrypting their traffic. This sea change left the district's IT team unable to see what terms students were searching on Google, which YouTube videos they were watching, and much more.

Thanks to the Lightspeed Systems Web Filter, Zach can filter MSSD14's network with selective SSL decryption. This allows him to see and allow traffic from select HTTPS websites — such as Google, Apple and a variety of educational websites — while blocking network access to other HTTPS sites (such as retail and banking) that are unhelpful or distracting to students.

"Any of these companies that do filters can't call it a filter if it doesn't filter SSL traffic," Zach explains. "Lightspeed has a competent proxy system to protect the kids."

"Before SSL decryption was happening, all this encrypted traffic was sneaking right past us," Zach adds. "This way, we can still decrypt SSL traffic, but it doesn't hinder education."

Supporting Safe Mobile Learning

The MSSD14 students who are part of the one-to-one initiative get to take their iPads with them when they leave school. This presented a logistical hurdle for district staff: How could they guarantee safe and appropriate web access for students when they left their school networks?

The MSSD14 staff recognized the importance of having powerful mobile filtering and reporting to keep students' online activity filtered and monitored wherever their devices travel. "We're really lucky to have an administration that cares about kids' safety when they're at home," Zach explains.

District: Manitou Springs School District 14
Product: Web Filter
Location: Colorado

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Zach Miller, District Tech
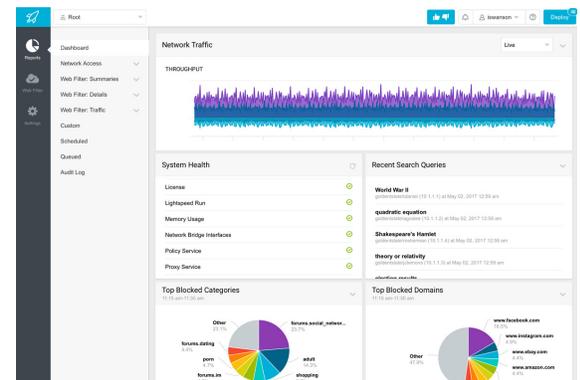
That's why district staff zeroed in on Lightspeed's Web Filter, which offers fast mobile filtering as an included cost as well as powerful, drill-down reporting.

"The ability to protect students at home is pretty big, because if we're going to give a student a tablet to take home at night, we're really responsible for these young eyes," Zach says. "The ability to control where they can and can't go from home is a pretty cool technology."

Zach is gratified knowing that his students get a safe, age-appropriate online experience no matter where they are.

"They can't go anywhere we don't want them to go, whether they're in Starbucks, in McDonald's, or at home," he says.

Saving Lives With Web Filter Reports

As the primary administrator of Web Filter, Zach is responsible for monitoring web activity for suspicious and unsafe behavior — quite a feat, considering his network includes almost 1,500 students plus staff.

To stay on top of so much traffic, Zach needs smart reporting tools to help him pick up on signs of students in danger.

That's why Zach depends on Web Filter's Suspicious Search Reports, which he reviews at least once a week. This feature makes it easy for Zach to identify online mischief as well as students who may be in harm's way. It's possible this function has even saved student lives at MSSD14.

"On occasion, we'll catch a student who is Googling something about suicide," Zach says. "Being able to forward that data to a principal and a counselor could be the difference between someone graduating high school or not graduating high school."

"It's really cool to be able to see what's happening on the network in a GUI, in something that's user-friendly," he adds.

Conclusion

Zach is committed to protecting his district with the Lightspeed Systems Web Filter. "If I had the option to change, I definitely wouldn't," he says, due to the solution's powerful, smart filtering as well as Lightspeed's outstanding customer support team. ("They've saved us I don't know how many times," he says.)

"It makes work a lot easier, makes my life easier, and makes our IT team and our technology seem smarter," Zach continues. "If someone wants to know what's happening on the network, and in a 30-second glance we can get an answer to something, it makes us look awesome."

Zach's years of managing content filters makes him appreciate Lightspeed's solution all the more.

"I have experience in other school districts trying to filter kids with different solutions," Zach says. "It is just not the same."

He adds, "Someday, if I move to another district, my cards would definitely be on the table for Lightspeed."

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