St Albans High School for Girls
Improving the desktop experience for students and staff

Frustrated by the poor performance and inflexibility of its existing remote access system, St Albans High School for Girls appointed Cutter to design and deliver a new virtualized desktop infrastructure. Now, staff and students can access their desktops their desktops anytime, anywhere, from any device, which is helping to improve teaching and learning, while also reducing costs.

Challenges Faced

Providing flexible access to IT was becoming an increasingly big priority for St Albans High School for Girls, a selective, independent day school for pupils between the ages of four and eighteen. The school had an existing remote access system that enabled students and members of staff to access documents and applications from home, but it was unreliable and difficult to use. Critically, this aging system did not support Bring Your Own Device (BYOD), so the school could not meet the needs of teachers and older students who wanted to be able to use their own laptops and tablets on the school site.

At the same time, the school's IT team recognised that a growing proportion of its time and budget was being consumed by managing, maintaining and replacing an estate of over 600 PCs across the campus. Consequently, it wanted to explore ways to exploit virtualized technology and thin clients as a means of both simplifying IT management and reducing IT expenditure.

Cutter made all the difference by:

- Designing a VDI solution to precisely meet the current and future needs of the school

- Planning the implementation to minimise disruption for students and staff

- Delivering the new VDI environment on schedule and on budget

- Providing professional, dependable and responsive support

Services Provided

St Albans School appointed Cutter after considering proposals from three alternative IT providers. Bahram Tavakoli, head of IT Services at the school, recalls: "Cutter demonstrated a very effective proof of concept and presented a flexible implementation plan that would cause minimum disruption to the running of the school. In contrast, the solutions proposed by alternative suppliers included scheduled downtime, which isn't welcome in any organisation."

To achieve the school's objectives, Cutter recommended a virtualized desktop infrastructure (VDI), based on VMware virtualization software, Fujitsu servers and a gradual migration to thin clients. It designed and specified the whole environment and then implemented it, ensuring that the solution delivered the necessary performance for end users. "Cutter really understood our requirements," Tavakoli says.

The whole VDI project was completed on budget, within the planned three month project schedule. "We have to keep a close eye on some suppliers to make sure milestones are met – but not Cutter," remarks Tavakoli. "The company is very professional and always does exactly what it says it will."

Today, the school appreciates the fact that Cutter is always on hand to offer advice and assistance whenever needed, helping it to achieve its future goals. "We are very pleased with the support that we get from Cutter, especially the speed of response," notes Tavakoli. "Whenever we have a question, Cutter gets back to us really quickly with the information we need."

Results Achieved

The VDI at St Albans High School for Girls has been up and running for over two years, with an impeccable track record for reliability and availability. Very easy to use, it allows the school's 1,000 pupils and 200 staff to access their desktops from PCs and thin clients situated around the school campus, as well as home computers, internet cafés and mobile devices.

Most significantly, the VDI has enabled the school to successfully introduce BYOD, so teachers can, for the first time, use their own laptops and tablets in school to help them improve the quality of their lessons. For instance, members of staff in the PE department now use their iPads to take the register on the edge of the netball pitch, rather than having to tick off names on a paper register and then enter data into the school attendance system later. "The BYOD capability allows PE teachers to spend more of the available lesson time on sports and less time on administration," Tavakoli says.

Students at the school have been very positive about their new desktop experience. "We did a survey of our 6th form students, asking for their feedback on the thin clients and they asked for more!" Tavakoli says. "We are now planning to work with Cutter to expand our VDI and make extra thin client terminals available in common rooms and other areas of the school.

St Albans School for Girls now expects to replace 50-70 PCs a year with thin clients, making long-term savings from reduced hardware expenditure and lower IT management overheads. As Tavakoli says, "The school can deliver a better desktop experience for users for the same or a lower cost."