

Case study

Client: Catawba County Schools

Location: Newton, North Carolina

Bringing future-ready tech into the classroom

How one school district's IT Department, Administrators and Teachers worked together to make student learning both relevant and engaging with Google Expeditions

Client

Catawba County Schools' Information and Technology Department serves to maintain, upgrade and install computer systems to meet the ever-changing needs of education, and positively impact student achievement. Its staff of engineers keeps in operation over 13,000 computer systems, 1,000 printers and countless other computer peripherals. It continues to support faculty and staff through the efforts of Instructional Technology Facilitators, in addition to sustaining school library media and student information programs. Their focus is to equip both students and staff with the future-ready skills required for professional and personal success.

"This has to be the best day I've had teaching in a long time. I've enjoyed this so much, and I know my students did too. I look forward to working with you again."

- Marty Sharpe, Chief Technology Officer, Catawba County Schools, quoting on behalf of a school facilitator

Challenge

Using their expertise as Instructional Technology Facilitators, the Catawba County Schools Information and Technology Department sought to expand on their tech-to-instructional bridge role by taking available virtual reality technology, and finding ways to integrate it into the classrooms knowing the inherent budgetary and logistical limitations.

Logistically, the district is made up of 28 schools, with K-12 class sizes ranging anywhere from 18 to 40 kids per class. When VR tools were first identified as one of the key pieces of technology that could potentially be



incorporated into classroom curriculum, the opportunity to take kids to places they've never been wasn't without its drawbacks. The main questions became, how would the IT department get it in front of every kid in the district; and how would it fit into a teacher's lesson plans? The IT department and teachers both agreed that they didn't want to bring in technology for its own sake; they wanted to ensure it wasn't seen as something 'additional' to a specific curriculum or a 'toy' that was more a distraction than a benefit. Integration was key, especially with regard to future-ready learning as it applies orienting the correct virtual reality experiences to the applicable grade level.

Lesson plans, standards and relatability to each classroom would also need to be assessed district-wide.

Solution

When Marty Sharpe, Catawba County Schools' Chief Technology Officer, took his personal experience with VR to the schools, one that started some years ago with his daughter, he knew this could be a valuable tool that translated well to the classroom setting. It was imperative that it went further than just grabbing a student's attention—it had to excel at keeping it as well.

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His next step was to approach school administrators and the superintendent by presenting the value of VR technology such as Google Expeditions, and how it would translate for education moving forward. Because it was met with very little opposition, his team was able to implement and expand with relative ease.

Once Best Buy® announced the Expeditions Kits' availability, and Marty's team received the go-ahead to purchase, he utilized his existing relationship with his Account Manager to start out with a 30-Kit for all of the schools in the district.



Our custom-built Google Expeditions Kits come out-of-the-box-ready for teachers to take students on over 500 educational adventures.

Before deployment, Marty and his IT staff sent out a form to teachers, asking what specifically they wanted to do with the Google Expeditions Kit, so the appropriate expeditions were aligned with the right grade and curriculum; their input was key to making this a success.

Once they received the completed forms from teachers across the majority of Catawba's 28 schools, Marty and staff planned to meet with each respondent to ensure everyone was getting exactly what they needed for their class.

One of the main challenges Marty and his department encountered was how to transport the case from one school to another, as well as the logistics involved to charge the kits before the day's lesson.

To help combat these issues, Catawba County Schools approved an additional four 30-Student Google Expeditions Kits, as well as several smaller 10-Student Kits to make maneuverability easier, thus making the process of parsing them out to different schools at different times a much quicker and simpler task.

Having Best Buy Education available to answer some of the more technical questions regarding router implementation and other minor tech questions proved to be invaluable. It helped Marty's team understand how the kits and router worked together in the overall scheme.

“Breaking down barriers like this isn’t about the device necessarily; it’s about how do we work with one another and integrate ed-tech like this into our classrooms to promote excitement for both teachers and students.”

- Marty Sharpe, Chief Technology Officer, Catawba County Schools

Long-term relationship

Marty continues to check in periodically with his Best Buy Education Account Manager, and is always available to talk about all things ed-tech related. “It’s great having this ongoing relationship; to have someone there should something not work or if there’s a question that needs answering,” he explains. “But also, to hear about other related ed-tech gadgets and updates is helpful, too.”

He has also partnered with Best Buy Education on occasion to share the process and success of virtual reality in the classroom via Google Expeditions through webinars and tradeshow presentations.