Case Study
Syracuse City School District

PROFILE:

COUNTRY: USA
INDUSTRY: Education
SIZE: 22,000 Students

KEY REQUIREMENTS:

- A scalable, next-generation web filtering system with the ability to decrypt and filter Secure Socket Layer (SSL) traffic at very high speeds
- The ability to filter certain features or content within social media websites while allowing access to other content — and the ability for IT staff to easily block or unblock sites as necessary
- Fast, reliable customer service

MAIN BENEFITS:

- Very granular web filtering and policy control
- Future-proof flexibility to accommodate new devices and technologies
- Highly responsive technical support with same-day resolution

Syracuse City 'Blown Away' by ContentKeeper's Revolutionary Filtering Capability and Exceptional Support

OBJECTIVE

The Syracuse City School District in upstate New York was upgrading its network and required an Internet filtering solution that would easily scale. To realize the full benefits of its faster network, the district would have needed to spend a significant amount of money to expand the filtering system it was using at the time, and officials questioned whether this investment made good financial sense.

SOLUTION

One of Syracuse City's network partners suggested that the district consider moving to ContentKeeper for its web filtering instead. The district's IT team tested ContentKeeper at a few schools, and it far exceeded their expectations. Not only did ContentKeeper's Internet filtering and security solution perform better than the district's previous web filter, but it was able to handle triple the network capacity at less cost—and the company's technical support was second to none. Thoroughly impressed with ContentKeeper, Syracuse City quickly agreed to roll it out to all 22,000 students across 33 schools.

Background

As Syracuse City expanded its network capacity from 1 gigabit per second to 3 Gbps, the district's old filtering system was causing bottlenecks. "We were told we needed to move to a blade solution for our web filter to handle that extra capacity," says Andrew Cramer, director of infrastructure services.

But that would have required the district to buy a chassis holding up to 10 blade servers, at a cost of thousands of dollars—even though only a few blade servers were needed initially.

When one of the district's network partners recommended ContentKeeper, Cramer set up a pilot program to evaluate the solution in a handful of schools.

"We had a list of specific criteria that any new filtering system had to meet, as well as a 'wish list' of capabilities that our previous filter couldn't do," he says. "ContentKeeper said they could address all of the items on our list. We thought: 'OK, you're going to have to prove it.' Once we began using the system, we discovered that, yes—it does everything they said it would."

More Fine-Tuned Control

One of the capabilities that Syracuse City didn't have before ContentKeeper was the ability to filter specific websites within a larger domain, such as Google Sites.

With its prior web filter, the district had to either block or allow access to all of Google Sites, Cramer says. The district wanted to keep Google Sites open for educational purposes, so students could access websites created by teachers or their peers. However, that meant students could access inappropriate content as well, such as a site called "Unblocked Games" that served up online games.

ContentKeeper gave the district much more fine-tuned control over the types of material students could access. With ContentKeeper's web filter, Syracuse City can make Google Sites available to students but still block certain content within this domain. The district can also block access to YouTube but still allow students to watch YouTube videos that are embedded within other pages, such as their learning management system.

"Having that level of granularity has been huge," Cramer says.

Exceptional Support

Besides giving educators more granular control, ContentKeeper's web filter scales much more easily than the district's prior system. Syracuse City has not experienced any network bottlenecks at 3 Gbps, even when decrypting and filtering SSL-protected Internet traffic. And with ContentKeeper's load balancing server, "all we have to do is add more appliances to expand our capacity going forward," Cramer says.

What's more, the company's technical support "has been absolutely fantastic. It's been some of the best support we've had," he notes. "We have used other filters before, and this was the first time the manufacturer actually sent a technician to help us set up the filter."

This top-notch support has continued throughout the district's use of the system. For instance, Cramer tells the following story:

"I was working at home on something, and it was late in the evening, so most people had gone home for the day. I got a call from one of my late staffers saying our Internet use had gone through the roof. We had only been using ContentKeeper for about a week, and so when I went to log in, I couldn't remember my password. I tried some options and locked myself out."

He continued: "I emailed ContentKeeper explaining what happened—and within 10 minutes I had a response. The individual said he'd removed the lock so I could log back in, and he also added some new reports to our reports screen, so I could tell who our highest bandwidth users were and what the nature of the problem might be. My immediate request was that I'd locked myself out of the system, but in explaining what I had been trying to do, ContentKeeper took the extra step of pointing me in the right direction for my investigation. That was impressive to me. I logged in, saw the reports, and within less than a minute I had all the answers I needed."

RESULT

With ContentKeeper, the Syracuse City School District has found an Internet filtering system that easily handles the district's expanded network capacity with no delays. At the same time, the system gives educators and administrators more fine-tuned control over the content that students can access. And though students aren't taking school-issued devices home with them at this time, ContentKeeper's ability to filter Internet traffic wherever students are located without using a proxy server has the district well positioned for success, should officials implement a take-home mobile learning initiative in the future.

"My team have been blown away" by ContentKeeper's solution, Cramer concludes.

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