



About Mountain Brook School System:

Mountain Brook Schools is a small city school district in suburban Birmingham, AL, consisting of four elementary campuses that serve kindergarten through sixth grade, Mountain Brook Junior High School and Mountain Brook High School. About 98% of Mountain Brook students go on to colleges and universities throughout the United States.

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MOUNTAIN BROOK SCHOOL SYSTEM

Much More Than Filtering and Monitoring Students

CHALLENGE:

As Mountain Brook School System started to move its technology to the cloud, among various initiatives was the deployment of G Suite for Education, which lacked controls to assure student safety.

SOLUTION:

After initially using a server-based content filter for email, the district quickly realized that it put the focus on discipline rather than instruction and promoting digital citizenship. With Gaggle Safety Management for G Suite, Mountain Brook now has a proven way to apply consistent, district-approved policies while using it to aid in important conversations with students.

RESULTS:

Gaggle Safety Management for G Suite is becoming an invaluable resource for everyone involved in education at Mountain Brook Schools, from teachers and administrators, to students and parents.

Much More Than Filtering and Monitoring Students

To say that Donna Williamson has seen a lot during her 30-plus year career in technology is an understatement. The technology director at Mountain Brook School System began her career in 1982 at a neighboring school district, helped write the first technology curriculum and technology plan for the state of Alabama, and continues to serve on the state's technology planning committee decades later.

What can't be exaggerated is how much the job of a technology director continues to change with the addition of more responsibilities often without an increase in staff. "Gaggle has become an extension to our district and to my team," she said. "It's a turnkey solution that allows me to focus my time elsewhere and gives administrators,

teachers and parents the ability to sleep better at night knowing that our kids are more safe."

One of the added responsibilities was to move student email to the cloud. The district gave every student a Gmail account and used a server-side solution from McAfee for filtering content. "It was just impossible to filter children like adults," recalled Donna, referring to the enterprise-level product. "It was clear that they were trying to make a solution for adults work for a 10-year-old. It just didn't work."

In addition to a large amount of false-positives, the messages that students would receive weren't conducive to the affluent, well-educated families in the district. Case in point, students would receive threatening messages in big red letters stating, "Your message has been blocked."

"I've looked at a lot of products over my career," said Donna. "Gaggle Safety Management is tailor-made for K-12 and that remains really important to me and to the district."

The next phase of moving to the cloud was deploying G Suite for Education, Google's full suite of productivity applications, including Google Docs, which without Gaggle would have become the burden of teachers to monitor. "I don't think we should put that responsibility on teachers," said Donna. "They don't have time to do that and it just takes them away from teaching."

Creating Conversations

Mountain Brook doesn't view Gaggle Safety Management as a filtering and monitoring solution. In fact, students and even parents don't either. "There are a lot of kids today who are depressed, not necessarily in our school system, but across the board," said Donna. "There's a lot of pressure on them today and as educators, I feel it's our responsibility to help."

One story involved a depressed student who had something happen to a friend over the weekend. A Gmail exchange between the students resulted in a Possible Student Situation (PSS) from Gaggle Safety

Management. “This incident, in particular, required me to contact our head of student services, said Donna. “It was all kept very confidential and a counselor at the school was able to talk to that child and make a life-threatening difference.”

Now, even with fewer false positives, Mountain Brook is able to foster digital citizenship amongst its students. “I haven’t received a single phone call from a parent, or anyone, that a child got upset about being warned because of inappropriate language or behavior when there might not have been anything they actually did wrong,” said Donna. “With Gaggle’s help, our students also are taking it upon themselves to act more responsibly online after the first user violation.”

Donna stresses that technology initiatives at Mountain Book are done for instruction-based reasons and not to discipline students or just for technology’s sake. “We want to always provide a very professional kind of a nurturing,” she said. “Everybody who’s had dealings with Gaggle thinks it’s awesome; from teachers and student services, all the

way up to our superintendent, Gaggle has helped our students become better digital citizens and better learners.”

When parents catch wind of Gaggle, there are similar positive reactions. Another story involved a student who Gaggle Safety Management observed was sending photos of him with a bloody nose. It turned out that he injured himself pole-vaulting. “The message from Gaggle was written in such a way that it was not accusing; it was more like what we try to do every day in person with our students, which is to customize the attention that each individual child needs,” said Donna.

The reaction from the parent? “Wow, you guys are taking care of my child better at school than I am at home. Can I buy it?”

Donna is also quick to point out the value that Gaggle brings to the district around student data privacy. As part of her ever-expanding role as technology director, she’s responsible for student information security and sends an agreement for a new school board-approved data governance policy for all vendors to sign. “Gaggle was one of the

first to sign up,” she said. “I’m very cautious about who has access to our student data, and I feel very comfortable with Gaggle’s commitment to student data privacy.”

Lastly, Mountain Brook has never relied on E-Rate funds or other grants to pay for Gaggle. It continues to be a line item in the school system’s budget.

“Gaggle gives us a way to have conversations with children to figure out what’s going on in their lives while not always making assumptions. It’s not a filtering and monitoring tool, but it’s a great tool for helping us to have conversations with children,” explains Donna. “I don’t think any school district can afford not to use Gaggle. Unfortunately, we now live in a society full of technology, but also full of lawsuits. While we have always tended to be reactive to safety issues, those days are gone. If you truly want to move forward with technology and teach kids to be good digital citizens, you cannot leave it up to a few to do it and be just be reactive.” ■