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Rich Squires
IT Manager

Torrington Public Schools Adapts SyAM Help Desk for Remote Learning Assistance

As the largest school district in Litchfield County, Torrington enrolls approximately 4,000 students in grades pre-K through 12. There is one high school, five elementary schools and a central office, which houses the superintendent, assistant superintendent, finance, and support staff.

Rich Squires has been Torrington’s IT Manager since the summer of 2017. Prior to that he spent four years in a similar position with the Oxford (Connecticut) Public School system. It was at Oxford that Rich met people from SyAM Software and became familiar with the application modules offered by SyAM. Oxford’s choice of bringing in SyAM was based on the cost savings that would occur with implementation of SyAM’s Power Management module which automatically shuts down computers on a set schedule, saving significant power and reducing costs.

SyAM Application Suite used at the Torrington schools

Torrington uses SyAM for asset management for its inventory of Windows-based computers and, in the last year and a half, uses the asset management for its Chromebooks.

Torrington also utilizes SyAM’s Power Management feature which saves the district an average on between \$1,500 to \$3,000 per month by scheduling the shutdown of all teachers, staff, and lab machines daily.

The most critical SyAM module being utilized at Torrington PS’s is SyAM’s Help Desk. Torrington is a large district, and with only Rich and two technicians to manage all the IT systems, it was extremely difficult keeping track of and resolving outstanding technology issues. In the two years that they have been using SyAM’s Help Desk, they have resolved over 6,000 tickets, and have become significantly more efficient resolving these issues in a timely manner.

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SyAM’s products and knew the SyAM Help Desk was an up and coming product, so I contacted SyAM and learned that we were, indeed, licensed. The district had paid for the software but were only utilizing the power management function which had been configured during the original installation. It turns out that a consulting firm had begun to set it up and then simply dropped the ball. That led the district to establish its own IT support capability and during the summer of 2018 I worked with the SyAM people to set up the help desk for Torrington’s staff.”

Rich and the SyAM team set up an interface with Torrington’s Active Directory allowing them to use the existing authentication methods and not have to go out and create all the teacher accounts.

They also made the system accessible via the Internet. School staff or faculty can go to the district webpage, click a link and be taken to the help desk log in. They can log in from anywhere there is Internet connectivity. This is convenient because most teachers do work from home. If they had a problem during the day, they could log the ticket in the evening from their home using any computer and most importantly see the status of any of their tickets.

It took about a month to work out all the kinks and make it operational. Torrington’s teachers and district support staff submitted tickets using their “torrington.org” user id either through the home page portal or with an email sent to a help desk email address. At that time, the Staff Help Desk only allowed ticket submissions from ‘torrington.org’ email addresses; ‘non-torrington.org’ emails would be rejected. The system would then create a ticket and populate it with the teacher’s or staff’s contact information.

How did the Pandemic affect Help Deskement

“Like all other school districts, Torrington went to remote learning,” Rich said. “It took two weeks to come up with a plan. We are not a one-device to one-student district, so a lot of the students do not have a device at home. We sent out a survey to the parents asking if they had a device that they would be willing to let their student use to access Google Classroom and schoolwork. We gathered all the Chromebooks that we had in the district and set them up for distribution to the students that didn't have a device at home.”

While this was a big improvement, school administrators and secretarial staff were soon inundated with calls from parents with issues, such as, their child forgetting their e-learning address or their password. “Our problem,” said Rich, “was how could we manage all these student issues? I did not want to open our Staff Help Desk to the students because it would only make it even more confusing. “

“So, I called SyAM and asked if we could set up a totally separate help desk system for parents and students that would allow ‘non-torrington.org’ emails for reporting issues.”

SyAM quickly responded in the affirmative. SyAM set up a separate server and opened it up to all the different emails, the @*.com, @*.net, @*.gov, and others. It would allow a parent to send an email to ‘help@torrington.org’ and the email module would automatically create a ticket in the new Student Help Desk adding the email message as the reported

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Rich elaborated, “The system would create a ticket and fill in the received email address in the ticket. When a technician added a comment to the ticket, the system would automatically send the comment back to the parent or student. We did not have to copy and paste the email or cut the issue out of the email and then paste it into another email. It was all done by the help desk module.”

Once the system was operational Rich worked with the library media specialists who would support the new Student Help Desk system. He said, “We had seven specialists who took the workload off the IT department allowing us to work on other aspects of getting remote learning up, such as helping teachers with Google Classroom. When we ended the school year, we had over 500 tickets in the Student Help Desk.”

Rich added, “Right now, we have two separate help desks, two different systems, but no additional cost. That was a big plus. The ease of use was just phenomenal. We could teach a non-technical person or somebody that had never used a help ticket system before and get them up and running fast. They gave us positive feedback that it was easy to use, easy to understand, easy to manage the tickets. We even got feedback from the parents saying that it was great that we had the system operational so quickly to assist them with technical issues and remote learning.”

The SyAM Help Desk Public Form

While great advances had been made, the email-based help desk was not without its own issues.

Rich says, “The system was working fine, but we were getting a lot of emails with insufficient information. For example, we might get a ticket from maryjean123@yahoo.com and the message would be, “My son can't log onto his computer.” No student name, no student location. We would have to send back an email asking, ‘What is your son's name? What school does he attend?’ That type of information. A lot of times we were not getting the answers to those emails.”

“So, what we wanted to do was create an electronic form that forced the capture of student's name, what school they were at, best way to contact them, and other information. The form would capture the information that we needed and SyAM uses. We were just making some of the fields required. A good example, mom and dad want to submit a form that their stepson cannot sign in. It could be that the child has a different name than mom or dad. So “Student Name” is a required field.”

SyAM's “Help Desk Public Form” is in two parts. Part one is the ability that allows IT support people to graphically lay out a form with multiple field types and define each data field. Part two is the ability for parents and students to make submissions that result in a ticket. The form is tightly integrated with SyAM's Help Desk module.

Rich states, “The Student Help Desk is such a plus that we’ve decided - if we ever get back to a normal school situation - we’re going to keep the Student Help Desk up and running as we are soon going to a one-to-one program with Chromebooks. My director even wants to set up a Student Help Desk so that students can help other students.”

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The Benefit of Working with SyAM

“I’ve been working with SyAM now for seven or eight years and am confident in their products. They work after hours and on weekends. If I email SyAM right now as we are talking, I will get a response from them in minutes.

“If we did not have the SyAM Help Desk, the response to issues from tech requests would take so much longer. When a parent sends an email, the resultant ticket is automatically sent to the whole IT team. We all see the tickets coming in.

“I am very happy with SyAM and I have actually given enthusiastic recommendations to other districts. The SyAM team is very responsive to phone calls and text messages. I mean, how many companies out there can you text the president directly and say, ‘Hey, I’m having a problem,’ and it’s resolved quickly or you get a phone call or text saying, ‘Working on the issue.’

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