

Edsby at Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board

Biggest tech rollout the district has ever done becomes core of its cloud strategy

The Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board initially set out to find a solution to the haphazard set of social media applications its teachers had been adopting.

Gathering requirements, it then sought a next generation teacher/parent/student portal that tied in tightly with the district's existing IT systems and that supported its approach to assessment and reporting.

With Edsby®, the district got all that—a system that was private, allowed for use via mobile and was available to students and parents 24/7, and available to teachers anytime and anywhere convenient to them. And it got something it wasn't initially expecting but that has been very welcome: a way to easily integrate its growing set of cloud services through one interface.

Background

Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board (KPR) is centered around Peterborough, Ontario, about an hour and a half northeast of Toronto. It's a mixed rural and urban school district that spans some 7,000 square km.

The district's 34,000 students and 3,450 staff are serviced by an IT department of 50 developers, tech support, telecommunications support, network people, trainers and software support staff.

In the summer of 2014, KPR decided to do something about application issues it saw mounting across the district. Software tools for teachers were in many cases old and dated with little support for the modern world of smartphones, tablets, and easy-to-learn user interfaces. Further, the teacher toolsets had not evolved to provide strong support for the approach to assessment being advocated by the local government and KPR's teaching and learning leadership team. Teachers had been trying to fill the gaps by using free services found on the Internet. Unfortunately these often introduced issues with data ownership, privacy, security and consistency of approach.

The district had also struggled for years with granting convenient yet managed access to teachers to student and parent information locked inside the district's student information system, or SIS.

"Our SIS wasn't easily available to staff. We needed a solution that would give staff instant access to the information they needed in their classrooms," said Dan Fitzgerald, Manager of Network Services at KPR. "And we really needed to focus on finding a better, single platform for communication and collaboration. One that wasn't just focused on teacher/student communication, but that would allow parents a better way to be involved with their school."

But privacy and security were essential. "We had to look at the needs all of our stakeholders," said Fitzgerald. "And from the parent's perspective, privacy around the data was critical. The info we have in our SIS is very secure in its current format, but bringing it into a more open format and different platform meant making sure we still had the same rules, roles and controls in limiting access to confidential information."

KPR also carefully considered on-premises vs. cloud-based approaches and their relative benefits. What about backup strategy?



Edsby was introduced initially to elementary students at KPR, followed soon by secondary school students across the district.

Upgrade management? Disaster recovery? And if in the cloud, how would data integration work? If the SIS was the prime source of the info it want to make available to its users, how would its SIS and existing security systems integrate in a cloud-based approach? "We use Active Directory, and we wanted to leverage that and not have to have a separate account management and authentication system," said Ron Plaizier, KPR CIO. "And then how do we administer parents, a group we've never had to manage accounts for before?"

KPR previously used one of the first modern learning management systems district-wide, a system called FirstClass. "FirstClass was much loved through the district," said Fitzgerald. "Its easy to use discussion threads were extremely well used. Our biggest struggle since transitioning to Office 365 was finding a platform with group collaboration features that could fill that void."



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Software rollouts at the district level were a risk. "The biggest light coming at us down the train track was the challenge of deploying a system of this scale and magnitude," said Plaizier. "By far, a system like this is the biggest project we could ever deploy in our school district in terms of the number of users that could potentially be accessing it at any given time. We've certainly rolled out technologies individually to our students, our teaching staff and our school administrators. But this is one that would touch all of these groups, as well as all our parents, in a very large way. So we had to make sure that whatever platform we looked at wouldn't place a heavy support burden on us."

Low support requirements were critical. Because while KPR saw demand increasing for its network and technology infrastructure, a decline in enrollment in the area also meant a decline in government funding. Which meant having to do more with less.

Finding a solution

KPR determined the solution had to be a modern platform that offered mobility and all the major technologies and platforms that exist today. It wanted to leverage the thousands of student devices that connected to its network daily. It wanted to fulfill privacy concerns with a platform that staff, parents and senior administration all found to be safe and secure. And it needed to be a system that provided access to all, anytime and anywhere; KPR didn't want the system to be only available within the confines of its buildings.

In the summer of 2014, KPR started developing a request for proposal. It met with stakeholders, looked at the needs of teachers, students, school offices and parents, and folded in technical requirements regarding privacy, security and integration. In the end, officials assembled over 100 requirements for what KPR wanted to see in a teacher/parent/student portal.

After reviewing vendor submissions, the team ultimately selected the highest scoring proposal, Edsby, and then performed a successful two month trial with four schools: two high schools and two elementary schools.

Yet when time came for district-wide rollout, there was an unexpected twist.

Cloud & silver lining in introduction

While a system like Edsby would normally be introduced in phases, a labour situation prompted KPR to rethink its deployment strategy.

"We didn't want Edsby to become a lightning rod for concerns from teachers that we were imposing new demands or expectations for classroom activities," said CIO Plaizier. "So we did a soft sell of the platform, and in September we threw the doors open and announced it to our schools as a year of exploration, allowing teachers to discover Edsby on their own. In hindsight it was maybe one of the best decisions we ever made."

Plaizier said the low-pressure approach created a sort of buzz in their schools. "Some teachers are always discovering and sharing new things they find. A lot of these early adopters came across Edsby and said, 'This is great! This is fantastic! All my students are here, all my classes are here, all I have to do now is populate content.' In hindsight, this worked out well for us."

"By allowing teachers to discover Edsby on their own, it led to grass roots adoption. It progressed into a teacher-driven implementation," agreed Fitzgerald. "Teachers embraced the solution as a new and modern way of collaborating. Teachers that are normally reluctant to use technology were finding it easier to use than any other platform we tried to deploy. Principals said Edsby gave them more direct access to their staff and parents in the community."

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Edsby's adoption district-wide at KPR was teacher driven.

platform, but there's a lot under the hood when you open it up," said Plaizier. "There are a lot of options there beyond just simple communications and collaboration, so we wanted to give teachers a sense of progress in their learning and use of Edsby so they weren't overwhelmed by all the features Edsby has to offer."



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Schools were invited to take their time before introducing parents to the system, and even before they introduced it to students.

"We described it to staff much like you'd describe the opening of a new school," said Plaizier. "You wouldn't want to walk students and parents in right away until you gave your teaching staff a chance to put resources up on the wall, or books on the bookshelves, or to put up a calendar of activities and other teaching resources. Especially with parents, the key was to get them to come back again and again. If they come into a school that's vibrant and full of discussions and resources they can use with their children back home, they'll come back again and again. But if it's just an empty, hollow place, there's no motivation to return."

The district's labour situation resolved and it did more formal training with the administrative and teaching leads at each school and gave them in-service training, with technical and teaching staff available to answer their questions. And it gave each school time to plan and prepare how to introduce Edsby.

Edsby a "game changer"

The introduction went well. Edsby is now a popular fixture at KPR. Educators across the district describe Edsby as a game-changer.

Scott Johnson, Vice Principal at East Northumberland Secondary School, was on the committee that evaluated portal platforms for the district. His school was one of the first four Edsby pilots. According to Johnson, Edsby has far exceeded expectations.

"In Edsby, everything is in one fast, easy-to-get-to place," said Johnson. "If I want to see a student's report card, see their work in a class, send a message to their parents, all those things are right there. I only need one mobile app or one desktop screen. I use it many times a day, whenever I'm speaking with students or parents. And Edsby helps me solve problems even when I'm not in the building. I can get to it from my phone in the parking lot, from my desk or from home."

"In our district's new strategic plan, there's a strong focus on creating innovative learning environments using new technologies, and Edsby lends itself really well to supporting this directive," said Fitzgerald. "There was also a strong focus on communication to parents in the plan. Again, Edsby has been that tool that's allowed us to provide a consistent

communication platform throughout the district that helps parents who may have multiple students in the district. They're not having to look in multiple locations for information."

KPR saw early on that Edsby wasn't going to just be another tool; it was something that would leverage all the district's other sites and tools. All of its other systems still had a part to play in the organization, but the common issue that administrators had heard from staff previously was that access had been disjointed until Edsby.



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"Edsby really is now the core of our cloud strategy," said Fitzgerald. "Edsby has allowed us to easily integrate all our cloud services through one portal by bringing in all the excellent online resource that are available today to our students and parents. It adds that cohesion we'd needed."

"Edsby has become the launchpad," he said. "It's allowing the parent engagement that many of the other tools we've used struggled to offer. The visibility that parents were requesting wasn't easily integrated into these other cloud services. And now, with Edsby, students and parent only have one place to have to look."

Partnering with Edsby

KPR is pleased with the level of service it has received from Edsby, the organization.

"The company has been very supportive," said CIO Plaizier. "Of all the tech companies I've worked with over the last 29 years, this company has been great to work with, very responsive to our unique needs. They've tailored Edsby to our regional requirements, and helped us mirror what we were doing with earlier platforms such as FirstClass."

Teachers have welcomed having a hotline to the software developer, right from within the Edsby product itself. Company personnel monitor an Edsby group where KPR teachers can ask questions and get problems solved.

"When there's an issue, there's somebody from the company hearing it and trying to do something about it. We've found that tremendously supportive, and not like other systems. It's very personal—a high end, world-class product with a personal, small town support feel," said East Northumberland Vice Principal Johnson.

"It's been a really good experience for us all in all," agreed Plaizier.