

Berlitz® and Albany's Brighter Choice Charter Middle School Team Up to Use Panasonic HD Visual Communications System to Expand Language Options for Fifth Graders

Brighter Choice Charter Middle School for Girls (BCMS) was looking for an alternative way to expand language offerings for fifth graders when it approached Berlitz in 2010. The timing was perfect. Berlitz had been having great success with a distance-learning English program for Panasonic employees and was eager to apply what they had learned to a new educational program with exciting potential.

The Challenge

"Our elementary schools had offered Spanish but it was an inconsistent program that always depended on who was on staff," recalled Vanessa Threatte, Founding Principal of Brighter Choice Charter Middle School for Girls. "I was thinking that if we were able to identify highly qualified teachers of languages other than English, it would be a better alternative than on-again, off-again options and we would be able to offer a wider variety of options. Part of our school model is that we emphasize choice because we strongly feel adolescent students will have greater success if they have more options and input with their education."

The Solution

Threatte's desire to offer multiple language options resulted in discussions with Berlitz, which ultimately led to the creation of the school's first distance-learning program — one that enabled fifth-grade girls to choose Spanish, French or Mandarin Chinese. "We started looking into ways to put the Panasonic high-definition videoconferencing system we had to good use for Brighter Choice and it turned out to be a perfect fit for delivering language classes to fifth graders," explained Briant Sarris, Assistant Director for Berlitz Kids in the U.S.

BCMS installed the Panasonic KX-VC500 HD Visual Communications system — the same one Berlitz uses. "We investigated other videoconferencing options and ultimately decided to go with Panasonic because of their relationship with Berlitz and their customer service, which exceeded that of the competitors," Threatte said. "Panasonic installed the systems and worked with our network/IT department to get everything working properly. The technology is very easy to use. It's essentially a remote control—you literally power on, point, click and connect."

The Impact

On the Berlitz lesson day, two small groups of 4 or 5 students rotate through for a 30-minute language lesson while the balance of the students work independently using headsets and self-paced software. "We have a highly qualified teacher on our end supporting, facilitating and moderating the live learning experience and guiding students through the independent study portion of class," Threatte explained.



Customer Information

With more than 550 facilities in over 70 countries, Berlitz is a renowned global education and leadership training company offering a comprehensive portfolio of programs, including language instruction for more than 50 languages and training in business communication, global leadership, cultural competency and diversity and inclusion. The organization is best known for the industry-standard Berlitz Method®, which changed the way language was taught when it was introduced 133 years ago.

Berlitz programs are taught by highly trained, native speakers and available via multiple platforms, ranging from personalized private instruction to in-person small group instruction to Web-based virtual classrooms that bring live instruction to any desktop PC equipped with a high-speed Internet connection.



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The collaboration between Berlitz and BCMS and the resulting language program has been enthusiastically embraced by administrators, teachers and students alike. “It has been a very, very rewarding experience,” said Berlitz Language Instructor Trisha J. Cunningham, who has been teaching Spanish to fifth grade students in Albany from the Berlitz facility in Princeton, New Jersey for 10 months. “The technology is a great learning tool—the kids are really fascinated with it and excited to participate.” She especially likes having the ability to highlight key points of a lesson using the system’s second camera. “Visuals are important for making the experience dynamic.”

The distance-learning program is paying dividends, according to Bill Hoff, BCMS’s Director of Finance and Operations. “First, the Panasonic unit is very cost-effective compared to the competition,” he said, noting that other systems can cost more than five times as much. “Then there is the program itself, which enables us to offer year-round Berlitz instruction in multiple languages, which we couldn’t possibly afford to do otherwise.”

Andres Gonzalez, Americas Regional Director for Berlitz Kids, noted that they have also received inquiries from schools in hard-to-reach areas—including one in Arkansas—where it’s very hard to get instruction. “For them, receiving instruction through the computer is not an option but teleconferencing is a real possibility,” he said.

Both Berlitz and BCMS have been extremely satisfied with the overall quality of the experience. “The clarity of the audio and video still amazes me,” Threatte observed. “The microphone is utterly amazing. The kids talk normally and it picks up everything throughout the classroom.”

A Success Story

The Berlitz program has been so successful that BCMS has expanded it to include sixth graders for the 2011-2012 school year. “This technology has allowed us to expose our students to teachers who are native language speakers from other countries, which is sort of an ‘aha’ moment for them,” Threatte said. What’s next? In addition to planning a virtual field trip to Australia’s Great Barrier Reef, the BCMS principal sees potential for offering advanced courses through distance learning. “We’re very excited about the possibilities.”



Brighter Choice Charter Middle School