



Company

Washington State
School for the Blind

Company Size

1,400 students statewide
40 instructors

Location

Vancouver, Washington

Industry

Education

Overview

Washington State School for the Blind provides educational services to more than 1,400 blind and visually impaired students from birth to 21 years. WSSB is nationally accredited by the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools (NAAS) and serves as a statewide demonstration and resource center, providing direct and indirect services to students both on campus and in the student's local community.



Case Study: Washington State School for the Blind

Connecting Teachers and Students with an Interactive Unified Communications Solution

School creates interactive classroom with Microsoft Lync and Logitech B910 HD Webcam and Logitech USB Headset H390 for distance learning program

A good education is the key to success, but for blind and visually impaired students, access to qualified teachers trained in Braille is limited—particularly in the highly specialized areas of mathematics and science. To accommodate the needs of its 1,400 students statewide, the Washington State School for the Blind (WSSB) has embraced specialized instruction methods, including a distance learning initiative to connect certified teachers with students for the best education possible.

WSSB began looking at distance learning options when the school's math teacher, Robin Lowell, announced she was moving. "A great math teacher with the skills to teach visually impaired students is irreplaceable, so we had to find a way to keep her," explained Ed Lukowski, Education Network Support at WSSB. The school launched its distance learning program with a traditional video conferencing system, but found that it did not meet its needs for collaborative learning. Lukowski turned to Microsoft® Lync™ 2010 for a more interactive unified communications solution that provides instant messaging (IM), videoconferencing, desktop sharing, file transfers, and whiteboard capabilities.

Knowing that a life-like video experience is key to UC user adoption, the school chose the Logitech B910 HD Webcam. "We installed the Logitech B910 HD Webcam because it is certified for Microsoft Lync, provides excellent image and sound quality, and is easy to use. The Logitech USB Headset H390 delivers the audio quality needed to further enhance communications."

An Interactive Classroom

The school's new distance learning program—which now uses Microsoft Lync 2013—gives visually impaired students located in several Northwest states access to teachers who are trained in the Nemeth Braille code for mathematics. In fact, one of the school's students in Idaho said that this is the first time he has ever been taught math by a teacher who is both a certified "highly qualified" math teacher and also a teacher of the visually impaired.

"Using Logitech webcams and Microsoft Lync, we can provide a high-quality, life-like learning environment to visually impaired students, who might otherwise not have access to trained teachers, to better meet their specialized needs," said Lowell. "As a teacher, there is no greater feeling than knowing you have helped a student gain the skills needed to advance in the world."

The classroom is equipped with a large 32-inch display, which shows Lowell (who works from home), and relevant documents via video, and a Logitech B910 HD Webcam that gives her a complete, wide-angle view of the classroom. She can see each student as they are working and acknowledge visitors who may enter the class. "I can watch students work through their answers, see their reactions as I teach, and provide immediate assistance where needed," explained Lowell. "The Logitech camera allows me to really be part of the classroom. I can see nuances I would not be able to otherwise. I can see the subtleties of the students' faces and body language. I can see who is coming and going into my classroom, the weather out the windows, and more. I think this is a major factor why my classes work as well as they do. We all forget that we are not in the same room!"

Students use standard laptops with Microsoft Lync 2013, screen readers, and Braille displays that convert text into Braille and vice versa. Low-vision students use a program that can magnify the screen up to three times to see the whiteboard and better communicate directly with Lowell using IM. Blind students use a screen reader,

a software application that attempts to identify and interpret what is being displayed on the screen. This interpretation is then presented to the user with text-to-speech, sound icons, or a Braille output device. Using a computer-based Braille translator, Lowell can convert mathematical symbols into Braille for student use. "Students can ask me direct questions using IM without interrupting the class," said Lowell.

A second teacher, who is located on campus, connects to remote students using the same set up. Previously, students simply would not have had access to such an in-depth learning opportunity. "Logitech's business solutions, including the HD webcam and Logitech USB Headset H390, play a critical role in the success of our distance learning experience," said Lukowski.

Logitech Quality

"We have always loved Logitech's business solutions for their best-in-class image and sound quality," noted Lukowski. The Logitech B910 HD Webcam offers a 78-degree wide-angle field of view, enabling the teacher to see the entire classroom to address any issues or acknowledge visitors as they enter the room. Delivering fluid HD 720p video at up to 30 frames per second and razor-sharp images using Carl Zeiss® optics, the Logitech B910 HD Webcam also offers a real-life experience that enhances the learning process. "Image clarity is critical for our low-vision students. The clearer the image, the better they can decipher it. Logitech delivers the most life-like experience and excellent autofocus capabilities to improve the overall experience."

Simplicity and Reliability

The Logitech B910 HD Webcam is fully optimized for Microsoft Lync, which means that it has passed Microsoft's stringent certification process and delivers seamless plug-and-play integration with Microsoft Lync applications. "All we had to do was plug the webcam in and it worked, with no configuration needed," stated Lukowski. "Known for their performance and reliability, Logitech's business webcams were the easy choice."

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Ed Lukowski, Education Network Support, WSSB

Broader Reach at Lower Cost

"No longer limited by geography, we can attract and hire the right instructors for the job, regardless of location," said Lukowski. The school can also deliver services to a greater number of students more efficiently and cost effectively. Previously, teachers would have to travel to meet with students—including one who lives six hours away—as part of the program. "Teachers can better meet student needs without spending hours on the road and incurring high mileage and travel costs."

Collaborating for a Better Education

Not every state has a school for the blind. Some states only have itinerant programs to work with students in their home districts. Therefore, it is challenging for specialized educators to meet to collaborate and share knowledge. "We leverage our Logitech webcams and headsets optimized for Microsoft Lync to host meetings with other agencies, schools, parents, and our state representative to foster a more cohesive approach to education for the blind and visually impaired," explained Lukowski. WSSB also uses a Logitech BCC950 ConferenceCam in both the superintendent's office and the boardroom for staff meetings and interviews. "We like the fact that the ConferenceCam is also plug-and-play with Lync and combines HD video with a high-quality full-duplex speakerphone, and is easily portable from room to room for greater usability."

A Bright Future

On the cutting edge of innovation, WSSB is always looking for ways to enhance the delivery of educational services, improve efficiencies and productivity, and reduce costs. "Using Microsoft Lync and Logitech business solutions, we can effectively teach blind and visually impaired students the skills they need to be successful in the real world," concluded Lukowski.

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Challenges

- Connect experienced educators with visually impaired students, regardless of location
- Deploy web conferencing tools to enhance Microsoft Lync for distance learning program

Solutions

WSSB installed Microsoft Lync combined with Logitech B910 HD Webcams and Logitech USB Headset H390 to create an interactive unified communications solution with instant messaging (IM), videoconferencing, desktop sharing, file transfers, and whiteboard capabilities to meet the demands of a distance learning program.

Benefits

- Logitech UC products are optimized for Microsoft Lync for simple integration and ease-of-use
- School can attract certified instructors regardless of location and provide educational services to remote students
- Excellent high-definition video quality and audio capabilities for life-like experience
- Boost collaboration with stakeholders; increase productivity and efficiencies
- Lower travel time and costs, and work towards reducing environmental footprint

Toolkit

- Logitech B910 HD Webcam



- Logitech BCC950 ConferenceCam



- Logitech USB Headset H390

