COHESITY

Forsyth County Schools boosts data security and cuts TCO up to 50% with Cohesity

FORSYTH COUNTY SCHOOLS

Industry
Education

Use Case
Backup and Recovery, Data Isolation and Recovery as a Service, Disaster Recovery

Cohesity Solutions
DataProtect, FortKnox

Workloads
Applications: Microsoft M365, Canvas learning management system
Databases: Oracle, Microsoft SQL Server, Microsoft MySQL, IBM DB2

Key Benefits

- Reduced cyber insurance premiums by up to 35% while doubling the amount of coverage

- Gained the ability to restore data in minutes instead of hours.

- Implemented virtual air-gapped cyber vaulting and recovery with FortKnox as an additional layer of managed security to protect against ransomware

- Lowered costs for data management software and support by up to 50%

Forsyth County Schools (FCS) had been relying on a Veeam backup solution that was coming up for renewal. After reviewing options on the market, they decided to move to Cohesity DataProtect and FortKnox. By upgrading to Cohesity, the district was able to improve data security and significantly reduce the time needed to restore data. The Cohesity solution also enabled FCS to reduce the cost of cyber insurance premiums by up to 35% while doubling the amount of coverage on the policy.

Challenges

Forsyth County School district's highly skilled IT professionals have their work cut out for them. Managing and protecting the hundreds of terabytes of data stored and accessed daily by the district's over 65,000 end users is a daunting task.

"K-12 data was less of a target 15 years ago," noted Tim Fleming, Director of Technology Services, Forsyth County Schools. "Hackers have now discovered that schools store a lot of potentially valuable data, including personal information on past and present students, teachers, nurses, and administrative personnel. We save the information on our students indefinitely, including those in kindergarten who won't be checking their credit scores anytime soon. If hackers were able to steal their social security numbers, they would be able to use that data without their knowledge for 10-12 years. A lot of damage could happen in that time frame. Ensuring data security is the most essential function of our IT team."

> "Cohesity is a very powerful—yet simple to manage—data security and management solution and continues to innovate and offer new features, sometimes before we realize we even need particular functionality. Security is always top of mind, so capabilities from Cohesity like instant mass restore, role-based access control, and multifactor authentication ensure data resiliency across our district."
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> – **Tim Fleming**, Director of Technology Services, Forsyth County Schools

On any given day, almost 65,000 students, teachers, and administrators access the district's data and connect to the Internet. "We have to make sure our end users—and of course any outsiders—don't have access to anything they shouldn't see," added Curt Godwin, Network Operations Coordinator, Forsyth County Schools. "We do provide our teachers and students with secure personal devices, containing up-to-date antivirus and data protection software. But even with the best device security and end user training, we need a way to safely back up all of our data. In case one of our users accidentally deletes any information, becomes the target of an attack, or something catastrophic happens, we must have the ability to quickly restore everything from a point that is safe."

Another challenge for educational institutions is that schools typically don't have as many IT resources as larger, private companies. Therefore, school districts must look for technology vendors willing to work as partners to accomplish the same tasks Fortune 500 companies can pay someone else to do.

Solution

Forsyth County Schools had been relying on a Veeam solution to protect its critical data and applications, chosen many years ago when the district consisted of only 14,000 students. When the Veeam solution came up for renewal five years ago, FCS began looking for a better way to protect and manage all its data. "In some ways 2018 seems like it was just yesterday," noted Godwin. "But in technology terms, that's several lifetimes ago. Back then, all of our data was stored on-premises. We did back up everything on our Microsoft Exchange servers, but it was a slow, inaccurate, and tedious process when we needed to restore any data."

Since the Veeam solution wasn't able to back up or restore the district's data completely or within an acceptable time period, FCS decided it was the optimal time to look for a new solution. "We were hearing great things about Cohesity from our technology partners and other K-12 customers," said Fleming. "Based on their recommendations, it appeared Cohesity would be able to perform all of the tasks we needed, and much more. We ran a proof of concept on Cohesity and mounted our backups. Cohesity was able to retrieve the information we needed in a fraction of the time of our previous solution and gave us 100% coverage."

"We also looked at Rubrik, but their solution had restrictions around the amount of data we could back up or rehydrate," explained Fleming. "If we had chosen Rubrik, we would need to work with the data in small segments, or it would have taken three times as long. Cohesity was the only vendor that didn't put requirements around the amount of data we needed to protect and also performed the fastest."

The majority of FCS's data—including the district's student information system and Canvas learning management application—is now hosted in the cloud. "We have a combination of on-prem data that we back up to the cloud, including our users' personal drives," explained Godwin. "We also back up all of our cloud-hosted data, and bring a copy back to our data center in the rare occasion that something goes terribly wrong for our cloud provider."

In addition to adding several Cohesity nodes to the initial 2018 purchase to keep pace with the district's rapid growth, FCS deployed Cohesity FortKnox in 2023. FortKnox is a SaaS-based cyber vaulting and recovery solution that improves cyber resilience with an immutable copy of data in a Cohesity-managed cloud vault. "FortKnox was also extremely easy to deploy," said Fleming. "Our engineer actually completed the installation before the Cohesity engagement was scheduled to begin. We decided to go ahead and join the call anyway, just to let the Cohesity experts make sure everything was configured accurately. They made one minor change to a system setting, but other than that, they said it was done correctly. It speaks to the ease of use of the product if you don't need a huge manual and a bunch of engineers to come in and show you how to set up and use the solution."

Results

When asked why they chose Cohesity, Fleming replied, "Cohesity's ease of management was one of the main reasons we selected it to replace our Veeam solution. It was very intuitive to set up and simple to manage. The solution also enabled us to save a lot of money. Cohesity's product and service costs are nearly half as much as our prior solution. With Cohesity being both a technology and value leader, it allowed us to dramatically increase our data coverage and retention, while also being budget-friendly."

"Cohesity is a very intelligent and secure solution," added Godwin. "It is providing our team with known good recovery points due to machine learning that is happening in the background of the solution, including ML-based anomaly detection and threat scanning. Cohesity continues to innovate and offer new features, sometimes before we realize we even need particular functionality. Security is always top of mind, so capabilities from Cohesity like instant mass restore, role-based access control, and multifactor authentication ensure data resiliency across our district."

FCS is now able to restore all its data much faster with Cohesity. "Our data restoration times went from hours to minutes on common recovery tasks,' explained Fleming. "More involved recovery needs were not even able to be completed with our prior platform, leaving us in a bind when critical information needed to be retrieved. That's no longer an issue with Cohesity."

Cohesity also enables FCS to protect its data from ransomware attacks. "With the earliest attacks, if your computer became infected, ransomware would encrypt your data so you couldn't see it," said Godwin. "If you were backing up your systems regularly, you would have an uninfected copy of your data you could reactivate. But the attackers became more sophisticated and added delays to the ransomware, so the infection wouldn't be detected until the backups had also been corrupted. With FortKnox, even if our backups become encrypted, we will still have a secure and clean version in cold storage that we could use to quickly restore our operations."

The Cohesity platform and FortKnox solution are helping the district ensure that cybersecurity insurance is still available and affordable. "Cyber insurance is not only getting harder to obtain, but premiums continue to dramatically rise," said Fleming. "This year our premiums were set to double, while our coverage was going to be cut in half. We sat down with our policyholders and demonstrated the measures we take to protect our data, and how we will respond and be able to quickly recover with Cohesity. At the end of the conversation with the cybersecurity insurance policy holders, we were able to cut our premium costs by up to 35% and double our coverage, all thanks to Cohesity."

Fleming has also been impressed with the level of service he has obtained from the Cohesity sales and service teams. "The product has been so reliable that we haven't had a need to call support. The few times we've engaged with Cohesity professional services or the account team, the engineers have been very knowledgeable and a pleasure to work with."

"With other companies, you usually need to purchase service add-ons," added Godwin. "Whenever you have a problem, they'll say, 'If you had only bought this level of service, we could have helped you.' That kind of service 'upsell' never happens with Cohesity. They give you everything you need upfront. With Cohesity, you end up paying Ford prices for Ferrari performance."

"When I recommend something, my name and reputation are at stake," said Fleming. "There are only two technology solutions our district has purchased over the past 26 years that I would say are 'peerless,' meaning they perform exactly—or better than—expected and provide excellent value for money. With Cohesity, I can confidently tell my colleagues that they're going to get a fantastic product at an unbelievable price."

Summary

"Our job as IT professionals is to keep our district's critical and confidential data safe," concluded Fleming. "But there's no way we can know everything and do it on our own since we face budget constraints. That's why partners are so important to us. Cohesity works as a true technology partner to expand our knowledge—making our environment even more secure. Cohesity is the security blanket that helps us sleep better at night."

Forsyth County Schools realized many benefits by moving to Cohesity, including:

- Reduced cyber insurance premiums by up to 35% while doubling the amount of coverage

- Gained the ability to restore data in minutes instead of hours.

- Implemented virtual air-gapped cyber vaulting and recovery with FortKnox as an additional layer of managed security to protect against ransomware

- Lowered the costs of data management software and support by up to 50%

About Forsyth County Schools

Forsyth County Schools (FCS) is the fifth-largest school district in Georgia. The district serves 54,180 students representing 129 countries and 69 languages, 5,500 teachers, and approximately 8,000 employees. FCS has grown rapidly over the last decade. It now supports 23 elementary schools, 11 middle schools, eight high schools, and seven support facilities.

Learn more at **www.cohesity.com**

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