



**How a leading Secondary School in North Essex innovated during the Coronavirus lockdown to ensure their students continued to receive the education they deserved**

## The Background

Manningtree High School is a mixed 11-16 Secondary School with Academy status in Lawford, North Essex – close to the border with Suffolk. Setting high expectations and ambitions for all of its 900 students and staff, it became a member of the Alpha Trust in September 2019. Situated in a beautiful rural location, it serves a mixed catchment – with equal numbers of affluent as well as students from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

Recognising the importance of technology within a school setting, Manningtree High School has worked with RM – as one of its IT partners – for almost 20 years. Over that time they have steadily improved the quality of their network, operating system and the software that runs on it.

## The Challenge

Every school approached the Coronavirus lockdown in March 2020 differently. For Manningtree High School they were probably better prepared than some – in that they guessed that something was afoot as the pandemic numbers started to rise, and governments in other countries started talking about school closures. That said, when lockdown came, it was still a great upheaval.

**“You could say we were lucky in that we were prepared in many ways. We already had IT systems in place that came in handy over lockdown. RM Unify was our main point of call with single sign on for staff and students. We had also invested in a VOIP telephone system that became essential to supporting staff and students from home. We wanted to utilise more functionality with the tools we had purchased, so we asked RM to assist with linking our MIS to RM Unify, so we could sync classes and groups with Google Classroom and Office 365”.**

**Chris Cook**, IT Manager

## The Response

As an RM customer, the school had invested in RM Unify as a way to provide single sign-on for all staff and students, which made accessing their core systems much easier for all. At the same time, staff were able to access most of their key files and documents from home.

**“When lockdown came we all jumped to it. For many students it was the first time they had used email as their main form of communication in school. We were hugely helped by having RM Unify installed – simply having one point of entry to everything that people needed – Office 365, Show My Homework, Google Classroom etc.”**

**Brett Colley**, ICT Technician

As lockdown got closer to becoming a reality, they put together simple booklets to explain how to use all of the key pieces of software, which they passed out to all members of staff, and quickly tested the systems to ensure that people understood what they needed to do.

At the start of lockdown Manningtree High School had a combination of software packages already in place – some teachers were using Show My Homework, others Google Classroom, and others still were using Microsoft Office 365. They took the decision that they would leave individual teachers to select which one they felt more comfortable with, and not mandate any particular solution.

One decision that they were grateful for having taken, was in employing an external IT partner to be on hand to support them, which proved essential during lockdown.

**“RM know their products so well. The fact that they only work in the Education sector demonstrates that they know what it is like in a school. When we have a problem we do not have to spend hours explaining it – they just get it – even if it is someone on the helpdesk you have not spoken to before”.**

**Chris Cook,** IT Manager

An issue that the school were particularly concerned about was safeguarding. As such, Form Tutors were asked to regularly contact all students in their tutor group – and specifically those who had not engaged in any of the work that had been issued at that point. The challenge was that it would be very time consuming to develop new email lists for this purpose.

**“It was at this point that RM really came into their own. RM suggested that we could link our existing MIS system to Office 365, via RM Unify, and then create email groups in Office 365 that we could simply use for staff to contact their groups at the click of a button. These links would even update MIS changes to class and tutor lists. We had had this functionality for some time but never enabled it!”.**

**Brett Colley,** ICT Technician

So useful has this functionality proved, that the school are using it now that they have returned for the autumn term – in dynamically managing and creating new registration and teaching groups and communicating with them. Ready again should the need arise to work remotely.

That said, there have been many challenges. Staff are not issued with school laptops and that proved challenging. At the start of lockdown, even web cams and microphones could not be sourced for love nor money.

**"Before the pandemic I would never have imagined us having to phone parents and students and talk them through how to login on their computer. The biggest challenge was trying to work out what sort of technology they were using, and how certain screens would appear for them".**

**Brett Colley,** ICT Technician

## **Innovation During Lockdown**

One thing that lockdown has instilled, is a new "can do" mentality across many schools. As an example, Manningtree High School have found new ways to use technology to address Safeguarding issues.

1. In seeking to address a concern from teachers in being seen on video, they experimented with recording just their hands – both drawing and writing – with a series of pre-recorded lessons showing their hands moving over a board or a book. This proved much more engaging and interesting for students following the lesson than a simple voice over a PowerPoint slide.
2. Microsoft Teams was used for the first time ever, for Governors and Staff to easily and safely communicate. New handout guides were quickly prepared and these technologies continue in use today.
3. With some teachers self-isolating and unable to come into the school, they have practised undertaking live lessons at home, using Google Meet, where the teacher talks into a webcam so that they can be seen and heard by the students in the classroom, with IT Support in the classroom ensuring everything is working and that the students are able to hear and follow the lesson.
4. The school had already invested in a Voice over the Internet (VOIP) telephone system, which has many useful – but otherwise largely undervalued – features. One being the ability to make or transfer telephone calls to wherever a member of staff is – at home or in the classroom – such that the caller has no idea where they are. Best of all, it enables a teacher to phone a student at home, with the caller ID showing up as "school" – rather than the teacher's own home number.

**"Our teachers are innovating in ways I never knew possible. Whilst we hope we do not get a local lockdown, I am pretty sure we are prepared, and have built up levels of tenacity and resilience to respond to whatever is thrown at us. We are now looking into the possibility of introducing Remote Learning and conducting and recording live lessons using Google Meet".**

**Chris Cook,** IT Manager

## The Lessons Learnt

- 1. Do not assume anything.** Not all teachers have the same level of technological understanding, so invest time in those that need it more.
- 2. Think outside the box.** The pandemic put everyone into an unknown scenario, but some schools were able to navigate around the obstacles with a little bit of head scratching and plenty of perseverance. For many it has led to a cultural shift where people have become much more agile and willing to keep trying, even if things fail the first time.
- 3. Test your systems.** Whilst Manningtree High School suffered no outages during lockdown, they feared that everything would have come to a halt if they had. They put this down to good investment in the first place with a robust set-up that could cope with almost anything.

## The Legacy

All schools recognise that the six months of lockdown were the biggest challenge that our education system has faced in a generation. Despite this, through the hard work of teachers and school staff across the country every single school survived and all students were given the chance to continue their education.

We now have the opportunity to build on this – to learn from how people responded, the way that technology became an essential enabler, and the gaps that remain and still need to be closed. Whilst we all hope that there will be no more national school closures due to of the pandemic, we cannot rule out local lockdowns – but also for that matter – specific local disruptions such as fires, floods or bad weather. We have the opportunity to ensure our education system is more resilient than ever.

**"We believe we have got through the worst of it, and are stronger for it. We are now asking ourselves how to build on this – what other functionality do we have that we are not using? What other lessons can we learn from other schools in how they coped? How can we future proof our school...?"**

**Chris Cook**, IT Manager

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