



# Special-needs education drives district transformation

Upper Grand District School Board improves support for students with special needs despite increased budgetary pressure and boosts engagement for all students with Dell Chromebooks



K-12 Education | Canada

## Business needs

The Canadian school district needed to give students with special needs tools that “level the playing field” in terms of learning, and it wanted to improve engagement for all students.

## Solutions at a glance

- [Client Solutions](#)

## Business results

- Cuts the cost of a desktop by \$2,600 while speeding provisioning by 15 weeks
- Increases self-expression and self confidence
- Improves student engagement and facilitates deeper learning
- Boosts IT staff efficiency while providing more digital tools

*“Very quickly teachers realized that Dell Chromebooks were a transformative product for them. ... We’re giving our students opportunities to try new ways of learning so they’re challenged beyond just basic skillsets.”*

**Bill MacKenzie,**  
IT Program Liaison, Upper Grand District School Board

For decades, Special Education programs have provided students with digital tools that help them read, write and organize. However, the steep price tag of IT solutions for Special Education can restrict the number of students that benefit from these tools. Canada's Upper Grand District School Board (UGDSB) found a way to provide all its special-needs learners with even more tools than they had before and expand access so that all students can benefit from them.

UGDSB has been an innovator in helping students with special needs keep up with coursework by providing them with rugged laptops and software that converts text to speech, as well as other tools. However, because the cost of each laptop and required software licenses exceeded \$3,000, the district couldn't afford to give every student with special needs a laptop. As a result, some had to wait a year or more before they could take advantage of certain digital tools that would help them learn and complete their schoolwork. There were other challenges as well. Because students with special needs were the only ones using a laptop in class, some felt self-conscious and stopped bringing them to school.

## Innovation in Special Education benefits all students

In the process of researching an affordable solution, the district found an option that would provide educational tools that could boost the engagement and learning opportunities of all students. Bill MacKenzie, IT program liaison at Upper Grand District School Board, says, "Special Education is always ahead of the curve in terms of innovation. Our early work with laptops for our special-needs students was really the point of the spear that drove our implementation of Dell Chromebooks for everyone."

## The right device for the job

The decision to roll out Chromebooks instead of other types of devices came after an extensive proof of concept involving tablets, laptops and Chromebooks. "We could buy

30 tablets, 30 laptops or 100 Chromebooks for the same amount of money, so that got our attention right away," MacKenzie says. "But when we looked at how the different devices were being used, the Chromebooks worked. They were durable. They didn't bring up issues with slow boot times. And the kids loved them." In addition, by using Chromebooks, the district would not have to purchase individual software licenses and IT staff would not have to manage desktop images because the devices only run cloud-based apps from the Google Store.

## Device quality and support make a difference

Initially, the Upper Grand DSB purchased its Chromebooks from a different vendor, the only Chromebook manufacturer at the time. However, when Dell began selling Chromebooks, UGDSB switched vendors based on their relationship with Dell. MacKenzie explains, "We felt that Dell's Chromebook was better-built and that's proven to be absolutely true. Our Dell representative also makes sure that our deliveries are always on time, and he helps with logistics. The caliber of support we receive from Dell Services has always been outstanding."

*"The best thing that has happened since we obtained the Dell Chromebooks and adopted Google Apps for Education is that we've been able to 'level the playing field' for our Special Education learners."*

Theresa Darroch,  
Teacher, Upper Grand District School Board



## A creative solution to facilitate access for all

UGDSB has a fleet of 15,000 Chromebooks that it adds to each year. Students with special needs can take their Chromebooks home; all other students use Chromebooks only at school. And everyone can access their Google account at any time using any internet-connected device. If students don't have internet access at home or a device, they can go to their local library. Each branch has free WiFi and at least five district-provided Chromebooks that students can check out.

## Increasing self-expression and self confidence

Today, all students have more choice in how they demonstrate mastery of subjects. Theresa Darroch, teacher in Upper Grand District, says, "My grade 5/6 students can independently create documents, slide presentations and videos using apps on their Dell Chromebooks, and they often act as student coaches for teachers who are learning how to use the technology. Their enthusiasm for reaching beyond is infectious, and it inspires teachers to extend their practice into the digital realm."

Because all students now use Dell Chromebooks in class, technology has become a tool that helps children with special needs fit in with their peers. "The best thing that has happened since we obtained the Dell Chromebooks and adopted Google Apps for Education is that we've been able to 'level the playing field' for our Special Education learners," says Darroch. "Just last week, one of our student's from the Developmentally Delayed classroom presented a slideshow made with Google Slides that highlighted his independently written poetry."

## A central portal to access all coursework

Giving students a central, web-based platform for tools and coursework also helps boost outcomes. Kris Tozer, head of Innovative Use of Technology at the Centennial

## Tools that transform learning opportunities

IT personnel configure the district's devices and students' profiles so they can only access pre-approved apps from the Google Apps for Education ecosystem — and there are a lot to choose from. Blayne Primeau, elementary curriculum leader at Upper Grand District School Board, explains, "Students who can't write or have motor-skill issues use voice typing within Google Docs. Read&Write also provides text-to-speech, which helps students access novels, short stories and other documents that are well beyond their reading level. It also gives students with organizational needs a tool to highlight key information in digital texts without having to copy it to a piece of paper, saving time and keeping frustration levels down. They can also use Mindomo to make their thinking visible by using short phrases, voice notes or pictures to capture their ideas and then expand that into an outline and first draft."

Collegiate Vocational Institute in Upper Grand District, says, “Students can review their notes and assignments online and in a format that facilitates the use of text-to-voice. Work and assignments are also centralized, helping them to overcome organizational challenges.”

## Giving all students the digital tools they need

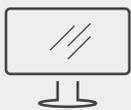
Students no longer have to wait for tools that can make a dramatic difference in their learning outcomes. “In 2015, provincial funding for special-needs technology was reduced with the focus on fiscal responsibility and innovation, yet we managed to fulfill twice the number of claims due to the cost savings of Dell Chromebooks,” says MacKenzie. “That’s because we went from a \$3,000 proposition down to a \$400 proposition. Instead of being able to afford only 400 devices per year, we can now easily afford well over 1,000 per year, so we can honor every request for a special-needs desktop, and the TCO is much less.”

Upper Grand DSB can also provision Chromebooks very quickly. “We have significantly increased efficiency. We now fill an order in less than a week,” MacKenzie explains. “In fact, we can push out 40 Dell Chromebooks in a week because we provision the devices with a minimal amount of touch.”

## Improving engagement and learning for all students

Teachers can now bring lessons alive with videos and pictures, which helps pique student interest and expand the amount of information that students can study about a topic. For example, Darroch starts the class day with current events. Rather than just talking about the news, her students now explore and share images and videos, which results in more productive discussions and deeper learning.

In addition, teachers and students can instantly share information and collaborate regardless of where they are. MacKenzie says, “Very quickly teacher realized that Dell Chromebooks were a transformative product for them. Teachers can now provide immediate feedback to their students, and this has been especially beneficial in helping students with writing. But the other piece is that learning doesn’t end when the bell rings. We have between 23,000 and 25,000 logons a day on our Google portal. On weekends, we have anywhere between 5,000 to 8,000 students on our portal at any given instant. We’ve never had any resource used like that — ever. So we’ve created a safe learning environment that’s available 24/7, and we’re giving our students opportunities to try new ways of learning so they’re challenged beyond just basic skillsets.”



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