

Case study



Saranac Community Schools

Safer schools within reach for any size district

Saranac Community Schools is a small school district covering about 70 square miles, located between Grand Rapids and Lansing, in central Michigan. The predominantly rural district houses four buildings, including one elementary school, one middle-high school, and two district buildings. Together, the district educates approximately 850 students per year and employs 125 personnel, including teachers, administrators and other staff.

Customer

Saranac Community Schools

Industry

Education

Solutions

- Safer Schools Ecosystem
- Avigilon H4 Camera Platform
- Avigilon Access Control Manager
- MOTOTRBO Digital Radios
 - Ion
 - SL300
 - XPR3500
 - XPR5350
- Radio Alert
- Orchestrate

Benefits

- Integrated communication system with real-time alerts that operates at the speed of today's threats
- Funding and personalized support were readily accessible, regardless of the school district's size



Challenges

Threat mitigation requires an integrated security system with real-time threat detection

Saranac Community Schools, like most smaller school systems, did the best it could with the funding and staffing available but was burdened with outdated and limited security technology.

They made due with a few plug-in IP cameras, a radio in each building and telephones in classrooms. Yet, camera coverage was limited to just a few locations and required active monitoring from staff, who were already stretched thin.

“When you’re talking about security, there’s so many ways you have to coordinate when it’s manual,” says Jason Smith, Superintendent and Transportation Director for Saranac Community Schools. “With an integrated system, if you can monitor and trigger an action automatically, it would save time and I wouldn’t have to worry about it.”

That’s why Saranac officials knew they wanted an integrated system that would include video security, radio alerts and even access control systems. If they could leverage their previous security investments and add new features like AI, all the better.

A clear need to upgrade, an unclear path to get started

With school shootings and other violence rising in Michigan and throughout the country, Saranac knew it couldn’t wait any longer, it had to make substantial changes to its security systems.

“We didn’t have much security, we were very, very limited,” said Smith. “But in the last few years, the issue of school safety hit closer to home and the need for security upgrades became more apparent. We realized we couldn’t wait, we had to act.”

Yet, Saranac, like many districts its size, assumed the latest security technology was out of reach for a smaller school system.

“Both funding and staffing were issues,” said Superintendent Smith. “Even once we knew what we needed, the can kept getting kicked down the road, because no one had the time or expertise to figure how we could pay for it and the thought was we probably couldn’t afford it anyway.”

When Saranac personnel began to search for options, they knew they wanted a company with a local presence, so that they could quickly receive in-person support, instead of a phone call with someone potentially sitting multiple states away.



Benefits

Integrated communication system with real-time alerts that operates at the speed of today's threats

Today, security at Saranac Community Schools has been completely transformed. With about 75% of indoor and outdoor spaces covered by video, Saranac staff have a clear view of what's happening around campus and inside buildings. Now, with advanced AI and analytics, staff can monitor more places at once. Plus, with Avigilon ACC, Saranac can follow a person or object of interest from any building and across campus.

"We love that we can upload a picture or use a screenshot, then search for and follow a person," explained Smith. "We've used it to aid law enforcement, helping them find a particular person and it works great to track vehicles through campus and see movement patterns. We were even able to automatically find an abandoned vehicle on campus, which was incredible."

Saranac staff were also impressed with the clarity and picture quality of the cameras.

"The cameras' High Dynamic Range has been a big difference," said Smith. "We have hallways where one side is all windows and when there's a sunny day the cameras can balance the light really well, the clarity is amazing."

With tight integration between Avigilon cameras, ACC software and MOTOTRBO Ion radios, Saranac staff now receive automatic alerts directly on their MOTOTRBO Ion radios when something needs attention.

"We've set up different alarms that alert us when something is out of the ordinary," said Smith. "For instance, if it typically takes someone five minutes to walk from one part of the building to another and if they linger for longer, we'll get an alert."

Plus, Saranac never misses an alert, since MOTOTRBO Ion radios can run on both WIFI and LTE networks. So, coverage is uninterrupted, even if the school's internet goes down.

Smith also said he appreciated the ability to integrate their existing older, non-Motorola IP cameras into the system. This was especially important to Saranac's board of directors, who wanted to ensure that previous investments wouldn't go to waste.

With the success of the system, Saranac is already planning for possible future expansions, such as adding Avigilon Access Control for automatic alerts and video coverage when doors are left open. Smith is also considering adding additional sensors to alert for vaping on school property, as well as flood and chemical sensors.



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Even as a smaller school system, funding and personalized support were readily accessible

Saranac's integrated security system was easier to attain than many first anticipated. The school system applied for and received a combination of state and federal funding from ESSER III and Section 97 of the Michigan state budget to help purchase the new camera and radio technology.

"This really speaks to the fact that even a small rural school system can make some wise investments to dramatically increase security," said Smith. "And the ability to keep what you already invested in and then add to it as budget and circumstances allow, is so critical."

“

It's possible for any school district to do this. It's not overwhelming, it's doable. If we can do this, other school districts can have the confidence that they can do it too.”

– Jason Smith,
Superintendent and Transportation Director for Saranac Community Schools

Another important factor in Saranac's selection was having a certified Motorola Solutions channel partner to help guide their purchasing and installation decisions. Based right in Saranac, Michigan, the company provided personalized service.

The leadership of a Motorola Solutions partner was so important to Saranac. "They helped us decide on the best options to implement now and how we should expand in the future. We now have one local company to call for support for the entire system, not ten different calls to locations multiple states or countries away" said Smith.





As far as future expansion, the next priority for Saranac is adding additional cameras at locations such as sports fields and parking lots as well as migrating access control to Avigilon and even adding a Capacity Plus system to enable district administrators to communicate with all voice and data users.

Feedback on the new security system from Saranac staff, students and families has been overwhelmingly positive.

"Kids and parents have been very supportive," said Smith. "Having more security is comforting and they see the value of the investment. Administrators and staff feel as if we went from almost nothing in terms of security to buying a Cadillac."

Summing up the experience of Saranac Community Schools, Smith said, "It's nice to be a 'small fish' that can look like a 'big fish'. We have a comparable system to the biggest districts around. It's incredible for us, it's just incredible."

His advice for other school districts, regardless of their size?

"It's possible for any school district to do this," Smith explained. "It's not overwhelming, it's doable. If we can do this, other school districts can have the confidence that they can do it too."

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