ITSolutions
Thinking ahead.

"With just a few clicks, the staff has access to all of the information they need – and it's up to date! Data is entered only once and the various layouts are populated."

Michele Heinz, Business Manager, Garfield Park Academy

Custom Database Gives Private School Firm Foundation for Growth

Background

Garfield Park Academy is a New Jersey State-approved, non-profit school for students with learning and emotional challenges. The school offers a unique therapeutic environment for students aged 5-21 years in grades K-12. Garfield's extensive vocational school offerings prepare students for active participation in the workforce upon graduation in the Automotive, Carpentry, Horticulture, Cosmetology, Retail Trades and Culinary Arts fields.

The Challenge

Like many private schools, when first starting operations in the 1990s, Garfield's data requirements were fairly unique and budgets limited so the school didn't have many options for database solutions. Garfield settled on the FileMaker Pro platform because it was a relatively inexpensive and straightforward way to make custom solutions, and systems could be built and maintained by in-house staff.

FileMaker databases developed internally served the school well for a number of years until 2007 when it started to become clear that the systems were getting increasingly disparate and harder to maintain. With the FileMaker base software recently rewritten to offer a more streamlined back-end, Garfield saw an opportunity to take a fresh approach. Management researched both commercial solutions that would have the majority of the required functionality "built in" as well as custom developed solutions that could be specifically tailored to Garfield's unique needs.

"Our old databases were built piecemeal over the past several years and were never organized or integrated," recalled Garfield Park Academy Business Manager Michele Heinz. "Each area of administration created a database to meet their needs. There were many instances of the same data being entered multiple times into different databases," Heinz added. "This created a lot of extra work, and the opportunity for many errors."

The Solution

The ability to maintain and update a finished system themselves prompted Garfield to stay with the FileMaker platform. IT Solutions was chosen as the vendor to build the replacement solution. With 13 years of FileMaker experience, and project expertise with a number of other private schools and educational entities, ITS emerged as the best option for building the system to meet Garfield's specific requirements.

The project began with careful analysis of Garfield's existing solutions as well as desired functionality for the replacement system. Following acceptance of IT Solutions' initial recommendations, the project got under way with an extensive and focused series of development iterations. The approach, based on the Agile project management methodology, involved approximately a week's worth of features programming, followed by testing, review and bug fixes. Once a particular set of features was accepted by Garfield, ITS began to build the next set of features. The frequent reviews and open communication allowed for a fluid project process from start to finish, and changes to the features were easy to incorporate "on the fly" as opposed to waiting until the end of development to address.

The completed system stores and tracks all pertinent data on students, including test scores, classroom and district details, related contacts, and health information. Administrative data tracked include daily attendance reporting, Board of Education, bus company, and staff details, as well as a complete purchase order module for use by teachers and administrators. Additionally, the health section of the system gives the school nurses a single source to track student medications, including dosage schedules, as well as student and staff visits to the nurses' office.

"Meeting with the ITS team frequently over the course of the database design allowed us to have a truly custom application," Heinz noted. "Our feedback was used in the development of each piece. The open communication also kept our project on time and on budget – 2 very important factors for our school."

The Return

With data that used to be spread out across multiple files and systems now available in a single, comprehensive source, Garfield is able to retrieve and report on students, staff and related elements more quickly and accurately than ever before. And the ability to add more modules and functionality to accommodate change at the school gives Garfield the flexibility to keep the system current for years to come – something that wouldn't be possible with a commercial software solution.