6 features of a Modern Australian School

How the right technology can help your school deliver a superior experience for management, teachers and students.
Imagine... if you could proactively identify students needing additional support, and coordinate the additional resources necessary to improve performance and contribute to a higher academic rating for the school.

Imagine... if you could provide students with the means to effectively plan, connect, collaborate, research, and gain insight from others, whether physically or virtually on campus.

Imagine... if you could use "on demand," unlimited statistical and computing capabilities, and become known for precision, time to results, and innovation.

Imagining the modern school

Australia’s education sector has become increasingly competitive – particularly amongst independent schools. There’s greater visibility, thanks to tools such as NAPLAN, and more expectation from fee-paying parents in terms of tangible results than ever before.

To become a truly modern school – that is, to operate efficiently, deliver superior education outcomes, and attract high performing teachers and students – technology is becoming more and more essential.

A modern school is not just about results in the classroom: it’s also about running effectively behind the scenes – using smart, digital solutions to improve everything from payroll to staff scheduling, the school calendar, events management and more.

At Insync, we specialise in helping independent schools use technology to become more effective in all areas – from the office to the classroom, and even off campus. We have helped a wide range of schools from all over Australia, and we typically focus on achieving six key features for the modern school. These include the 6 following features.
Every school, regardless of its size, has a significant administrative function. This includes but is not limited to financial management (fees, payroll, paying for third party services, etc.); staff management and scheduling; events management and coordination (e.g. fetes, excursions, incursions); collaboration and communication (e.g. newsletters, collaboration with bodies such as the P&C); supplies ordering and reconciliation, and much more.

For administrative staff, it can be extremely difficult to coordinate and stay on top of all of this – particularly as information is often managed in silos and using disparate technology (spreadsheets, emails etc.). Many administrative tasks are still managed manually, which is also very time-consuming and prone to error.

Each school also collects and manages a huge raft of very sensitive information on students and parents which needs to be kept as secure as possible. If the school doesn’t have suitable security protocols in place, the consequences can be dire.

Unless this information is consolidated and managed via a reliable technology solution, the school is missing a vital opportunity to operate efficiently and productively. It also means that administrative resources are tied up doing manual tasks when they could be focusing on ways to improve the school through acquiring new resources or establishing effective external relationships.

Ray Fleming, Education Solutions Lead, says a key problem for many independent Australian schools is their typically disparate collection of technology. “Many schools, in an interest to invest in best-of-class technology solutions, are now managing a whole raft of disparate systems, including student management tools, attendance systems, parental engagement solutions, curriculum management solutions and more. As such, most of their time is spent keeping these disparate systems functional.”

How Insync’s Modern School Solution Can Help:
To find out how a Microsoft
In the modern school, all of this disparate (and potentially manually handled) information is brought together into a customised and accessible Modern Automation Platform (powered by Microsoft’s Identity Manager). This solution empowers users for self-service, automates most common tasks, eliminates human error, protects data and provides detailed reports as often as you like.

1. Automated and consolidated administration systems
How All Hallows’ School streamlined access for its staff and students

All Hallows’ School is a large school in Brisbane, which caters for students from a wide variety of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. As is typical for schools, All Hallows’ found that they utilised almost 1 to 1.5 full time employees on onboarding, off boarding and managing staff and student logins to Microsoft products and various other platforms. This was taking time away from valuable tasks such as face time with their customers – students, teachers and administrative staff – and was also prone to human error.

The school sought a solution that could empower their users for self-service, as well as automate as many of the common tasks as possible. Through automation, they could achieve scale, save time and improve the quality of service they were delivering to their stakeholders – ultimately, students and teaching staff. It was quickly identified that the school needed a solution that could automate the provisioning, configuration and management of users across a wide range of technologies.

With All Hallows’ using more and more of the Microsoft public cloud environment, like Office 365 and Azure, they also needed automation tools that would handle provisioning, configuration and ongoing management of these cloud based assets. All Hallows’ needed a reliable and practically bulletproof solution for automating daily and weekly tasks for students impacted by the changes.

All Hallows’ has a long history with Insync providing Microsoft platform expertise, including projects for Skype for Business, Office 365, Configuration Manager and a Hyper-V migration from Vmware. Insync suggested looking at Microsoft Identity Manager (MIM) – a platform which would allow automation and self-service within a wider Microsoft environment. Insync worked with All Hallows’ to develop workflows that achieved a series of solutions, including automation for provisioning, configuration and ongoing management of all of their cloud based assets and self-service for their users.

The implementation of the Microsoft Identity Manager product has saved the school thousands of man hours and employee time and effort, configuring each user and scripting the deployment of permissions and software – all the while reducing error and giving more face time back to their customers: staff and students.
Today’s students are extremely digitally-savvy, and expect to be able to learn from anywhere, at any time, on any device.

To ensure your school delivers a rich, effective and engaging learning experience, anytime/anywhere access is becoming increasingly essential. Both students and teachers need to be able to tap into a wealth of learning resources regardless of where they happen to be – in the classroom, at the library, on the school grounds, or at home.

However, a major challenge facing school IT managers today is how to cope with the variety of devices and operating systems that students work with. Students typically use a mix of school-owned and personal devices in class—and many students complete homework on non-school PCs and Macs. This results in multiple levels of incompatibility.

According to Fleming, this lack of compatibility, and the lack of single sign-on in many schools is a major problem – leading to considerable inefficiency and wasted time for administrative staff and students. “Teachers wrestle with various file formats, students often struggle to open school files remotely, logging into applications is complex, and IT staff have to work hard just to ensure that new software is accessible to all,” he says.

HOW INSYNC’S MODERN SCHOOL SOLUTION CAN HELP:

In the modern school, technology is consolidated into a single, easy to access platform and students, teachers, parents and staff all receive single sign-on access to the tools and systems they need to get better results every day. This means students can flick between tools and applications with ease, regardless of where they are, or what device they happen to be using.
Ravenswood connects students from anywhere

Sydney girls’ school, Ravenswood, wanted to upgrade students’ email accounts, improve document access, and minimise BYOD software incompatibility. In 2014, the school migrated students to Microsoft Office 365 ProPlus (Student Advantage) for all students, and replaced Gmail with Exchange Online. Since 2010, their students had used Gmail to submit homework, receive school notices, and co-ordinate their extra-curricular activities. However, when Office 365 Education was released, the school saw an opportunity to improve the user experience through the seamless integration between our SharePoint intranet and applications, such as Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook.

Their objective was to enable all students to work seamlessly with the Microsoft Office suite used by teachers, and the school’s SharePoint intranet. However, the solution had to work across a multitude of devices. They also wanted to reduce costly on-premise storage and backup without in any way compromising privacy, and they wanted a solution that would not restrict parents’ choice when buying laptops for their daughters.

In early 2014, the school investigated one of the cloud-based solutions available from Microsoft. Students gained complimentary access to Exchange Online via Office 365 A2 plan and, provided that all faculty and staff were licensed for Microsoft Office, students would also gain access to Office 365 ProPlus at no additional cost. Office 365 Pro Plus enables students to download the Microsoft Office suite of applications—including Word, Excel, PowerPoint, OneNote and Outlook email—onto school or personal devices.

This meant that at one stroke, the school could create a uniform school platform, and get everyone working with the same formats. Students would be able to download the Office suite onto their Windows devices as well as Macs and other non-Windows devices. If students didn’t have regular access to a personal device, their Office 365 accounts would enable them to work from any connected device using Office Online.

Additionally, all students would receive one terabyte of storage on the Microsoft cloud service, OneDrive, which the school would otherwise struggle to provide and to back up itself. By replacing Gmail with Exchange Online and Office 365 ProPlus, and transitioning teachers to Office 365, Ravenswood simultaneously upgraded students email, enabled everyone to work in identical formats, and preserved parents’ freedom of choice when purchasing devices for their daughters.

Now, Ravenswood students can download OneNote, Word, Excel and Outlook onto school or personal devices including Macs, everyone can work remotely with Office Online, and parents are free to purchase their preferred devices.

**BENEFITS INCLUDE:**

- No more compatibility issues – teachers can upload documents onto the SharePoint system, confident that every student in the school will be able to open and work on them.
- Safe storage; automatic backups – with all documents stored and backed up in the cloud, students and teachers can be confident that their work is secure and always accessible. Even if students work offline, OneDrive will automatically update their files in the cloud as soon as that device is reconnected.
- Value for money for parents – with a standard productivity and communications platform, Ravenswood has freed parents from purchasing dilemmas, while also demonstrating value for money.
To get the best results, both staff and students need online spaces in which to collaborate and share information, in real time. When it comes to communication, students, teachers, parents and staff are no longer tied to the school grounds or the campus. They need to be able to connect anywhere and at any time.

Unfortunately, however, many schools are still operating with a traditional PBX system which is cumbersome, limited and costly. This is particularly the case for schools that have strong relationships with other schools, or which operate separate campuses (e.g. a separate primary and high school campus).

HOW INSYNC’S MODERN SCHOOL SOLUTION CAN HELP:

By contrast, the modern school uses cloud-based communication and collaboration tools such as Microsoft Office 365 and a cloud-based PBX – enabling staff, students and external parties to communicate efficiently and reliably from anywhere, at any time. This system is an extension of the school itself – changing the ways in which students work together, make their work and interactions visible to others, share content, and collaborate on assignments and research. Teachers can work with students online when necessary, without the need for maintaining physical office hours. Students can also set up their own shared work spaces and have access to the computing power they need.

Source: Microsoft, Education Book of Dreams
How Saint Stephen’s College cut their phone bill in half by embracing modern technology

Saint Stephens College is a preparatory to year 12 school on the Gold Coast. The school was using a five-year-old ageing Samsung PABX system which was constantly being pushed to its limits, could not be expanded upon, and often gave very poor call quality. After comparing feature sets and costs, the school decided to implement a Microsoft Unified Communications platform – to be designed, installed and supported by Insync.

The biggest challenge the team found was the training and education of end users, typically curriculum and administration staff. It was a big change, particularly for the reception staff as they take a high volume of calls. It was also a big learning curve to transfer calls via their computers by dragging and dropping rather than pressing buttons on a phone.

To ensure maximum uptake, Insync built training courses in their Learning Management System, which meant staff could learn how to use it. They also then built demonstration tests to fine tune employee’s skills.

Now, everything is transparent – as the new system integrates with everything, and all staff can see each other’s availability at any given moment. There is no ‘double dipping’ with two systems and there is only a single database to keep up to date.

As well as the voice quality being a real revelation, the school has also experienced huge saving in costs to run the system. As calls are made via their Internet provider, the savings have been significant; over a 70% reduction in call costs per month.

Feedback received from staff has been very positive – they particularly like the instant messaging and being able to share screens with each other when making calls.

Peter West is the school’s Director of eLearning. He says that while uptake of the new system is still expanding, the new solution is enormously better than what existed previously. “With Skype for Business, you phone the person rather than a location. For example, someone can phone my office, but if I am not there my phone or my computer will ring. This means I can be in the staff room, or even off site, and the person can reach wherever I am. This is an option which really enhances our communication capabilities. As far as I know, Saint Stephen’s is an early adopter with this type of solution,” he says.
For most schools, a key area of focus is keeping the IT lights on and functioning, rather than focusing on what the IT could be doing to make everyone’s lives easier. Often, the IT experience can be stressful and less than ideal. In addition, too many independent schools are still operating with on-premises infrastructure, which can be hard to maintain, cumbersome and very quickly out of date.

At Insync, we have helped many organisations transition relevant systems and applications to the cloud – in order to save time and money, as well as considerably improve accessibility for all users. However, schools also handle vitally sensitive data and student information and require highly secure private environments for learning. For this reason, it can be beneficial to invest in a hybrid cloud solution – with a mix of cloud-based and on-premises assets.

HOW INSYNC’S MODERN SCHOOL SOLUTION CAN HELP:
For many schools, moving to a hybrid cloud infrastructure (keeping the most secure data on-premises) can deliver enormous benefits – improving mobility, increasing flexibility and generating cost savings for the organisation as a whole. As part of this, the modern school will have an outsourced security system in place, with disaster recovery plans and a high level SLA from their service provider.
Marist College inspires new ways of thinking and learning in the cloud

Marist College’s IT infrastructure was already stretched to support existing email and collaboration services for the students and staff. Costs, including maintenance, leased lines to the data centre, and firewalls and other software licence costs were mounting. Valuable staff resources were being used to maintain a continuous operation, taking time away from focusing on innovative technologies and data sharing models to enhance learning.

Both students and staff wanted the same level of seamless computing they experienced at home by accessing files from anywhere, easy sharing of data and support for a variety of devices. The existing model required logging into an external drive that was cumbersome and led to security and storage challenges. In addition, it was Marist College’s aim to increase student satisfaction by moving to a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) model, which would not be possible with current infrastructure. To avoid a costly investment in on-premise hardware that would need to be maintained, Marist College made the decision to move to a cloud based model. The next step was determining how to migrate students and staff from the internal server onto the cloud and what the applications and storage needs would be. The school turned to long-term partner and trusted advisor, Insync, to advise them on the best strategy.

Provisioning infrastructure for 1500 students was a daunting task. The solution needed to be always on, always available. Zero downtime was a top aim. Missed homework could not be blamed on a lack of available resources. Although there was a choice of web based email and collaboration services, Insync recommended Microsoft Office 365, in part due to the large amount of storage provided and the proven results in education settings.

As a result of their partnership with Insync, Marist College achieved a quick adoption of Microsoft Office 365 throughout the school. The familiarity most students and staff already had with Office helped spur use of the solution and minimised or eliminated training needs. Students can also access Microsoft OneDrive and SharePoint resources that the school chooses to make accessible. While the college maintains a level of security and control over content, this process does not intrude on the student’s workflow. Marist College’s peace of mind over the availability of storage cannot be underestimated. The school is supplied with ample storage and an easy way to add storage should there be a future requirement. By using a cloud-based solution, the need to manage potentially cumbersome patch roll out processes and upgrades no longer exists.
Today’s students need to access productivity tools to help them learn faster and more effectively. They need to co-author in engaging ways; not working singularly but as teams. Students should, for instance, be able to freely collaborate and communicate with their peers, access a range of different learning resources, or engage in discussion forums regarding key areas of the curriculum.

In addition, parents should also be able to log in to check on their child’s progress and assistance, and teachers should also be able to participate.

**HOW INSYNC’S MODERN SCHOOL SOLUTION CAN HELP:**
A rich learning management system (LMS) is a key characteristic of the modern school – enabling students to store and access classroom notes and lessons securely, online. An effective LMS can also function as an assessment and grading tool, streamlining the process for teachers.
How Saint Stephen’s College uses blended learning to ensure education is never offline

As a champion for eLearning, Peter West has spent the past 20 years empowering schools by fusing technology into their learning and ensuring students have the resources to learn.

In 2010, he developed a series of tutorials to help teachers at St Stephen’s better understand the school’s computer studies course. In doing so, he realised that these tutorials could also benefit students, and started building more courses this way.

Following on from this, Saint Stephen’s realised it needed a learning management system (LMS) that could keep up. The school’s LMS at the time wasn’t delivering what the school needed, and after searching for a solution that could power the school’s new blended initiative, St Stephen’s landed on the Brightspace platform in 2011, and hasn’t looked back.

Brightspace also helps teachers personalise the learning experience for the students, which leaves more time for deeper, individualised discussion between teacher and student.

“The success of our LMS is really due to the enthusiasm of our teachers, who have adopted the solution and are creating some engaging and multi-faceted content. We have a style guide in place, which ensures that each course is structured in the same way. It’s not just a pile of disparate resources. It’s all very well structured and usable. It’s a content management solution on steroids,” says West.

Initial feedback from students and staff at Saint Stephen’s has been extremely positive – enabling the school to focus on what matters: blurring the line between offline learning and online learning.

West suggests that the school’s overarching focus on eLearning has been one of the reasons as to the system’s success, and cautions against developing eLearning systems in isolation.

“‘If we don’t provide a modern, rich learning environment, then we’re essentially stealing opportunities from students. We don’t want to replace traditional, teacher-led teaching, where teachers inspire kids to do their best, but we want to enhance this classroom learning and enable them to learn anywhere, any time. As well as enabling greater academic performance, it’s about giving the students practical and real-life skills that will enable them to transition well into university and then into the workforce,’ he adds.

“‘As well as enabling greater academic performance, it’s about giving the students practical and real-life skills that will enable them to transition well into university and then into the workforce.’

Peter West, Director of eLearning, St Stephen’s College
Data is playing an increasing role in education – both in the classroom, and in office administration.

While teachers already customise their classes and tuition to suit the needs of individual students, data provides the opportunity to take this a step further – honing in on students’ specific strengths, weaknesses and opportunities.

According to Fleming, data can help schools target problems before they escalate – ensuring that students are being treated as individuals, and that they have the resources they need to excel.

By incorporating data insights, schools can also continually evolve the way they are operating from a staffing and administrative perspective. For instance, with data insights in place, a school’s management team can tell which teachers are writing the most compelling eLearning content and incentivise them accordingly.

“Being able to predict the student journey in order to support the right interventions to enable the student to succeed is crucially important,” says Fleming. “In a perfect world, the technology would predict a student’s final exam results from the very beginning, and give them effective interventions along the way. If we spot that a child in year three is having issues with their reading comprehension, we can provide extra tutoring, or extra classes about writing, so that by the time they get to year nine, this problem doesn’t exist to the same degree,” he says.

Fleming also points out that thanks to the data analysis tools in the Microsoft stack, it’s not just IT staff that have access to data – but everyone within the teaching faculty.

“With Microsoft Azure Machine Learning, anyone can spend a few days building a model, and use it to determine required interventions,” he says.

Peter West from St Stephen’s, agrees that predictive analysis is going to become more and more important in enabling more customised, targeted education. “If we know when a student is likely to do poorly in an upcoming exam, we can take active steps to prevent this from happening. We can also customise in-classroom training according to students’ particular strengths and weaknesses,” he says.

HOW INSYNC’S MODERN SCHOOL SOLUTION CAN HELP:
In the modern school, descriptive and predictive analytics can be used to give teachers and administrators a way to measure and monitor student performance, and pre-empt student disengagement. This means the school can intervene early to get the student moving in the right direction.

By aggregating multiple types of student data – such as attendance, family, participation in food programs, transportation, and other social factors, machine learning can be used to monitor for indications of risk, as well as determine the effectiveness of any educational programs.
Tacoma Public Schools aspires to be an outstanding school district in which all students exhibit high standards of achievement and critical thinking skills, and are socially responsible, contributing members of society.

The school district wanted to improve student success by identifying students in the greatest need and providing them with timely intervention and support. Using Azure Machine Learning and the various tools in the data platform (SQL Server, Power BI and Azure Data Factory) the school region was able to improve key metrics around student academic performance; proactively identifying the key factors that influence student outcomes.

As a result of effective interventions, graduation rates in the area have increased from 55 to 78 percent.

Why Insync?

At Insync, we specialise in helping schools use technology to create more modern, collaborative and efficient environments for administration and management staff, students and teachers.

When it comes to digital transformation, we focus on three key steps:
1. Engage your students
2. Empower your educators
3. Optimize your operations

We have unparalleled expertise building and managing Microsoft solutions for schools – by having migrated over 750,000 users to Office 365 in education, producing our own automation product specifically for schools, through to providing modern communications solutions to leading independent schools across Australia. We understand the challenges a school can face with modern technology – and we’re here to help you get the most out of your investments to deliver educational outcomes.

To learn more about how we can help your school, contact us on 1300 652 207 or email us at education@insynctechnology.com.au