

At Prairie Spirit School Division in Manitoba, ChromeOS Flex unifies an existing fleet

About Prairie Spirit School Division

[Prairie Spirit School Division](#) is a rural school division located in south central Manitoba, Canada. The large geographical area includes many farming communities.



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Troy Sigvaldason

IT Director, Prairie Spirit School Division

Bringing far-flung communities together for learning

In smaller, rural school divisions like Prairie Spirit School Division in Manitoba, Canada, resourcefulness is a valued quality among staff and teachers. Troy Sigvaldason, IT director for Prairie Spirit schools, as well as his three IT colleagues, are always looking for ways to bring more tech tools and connectivity to students.

“We’re tasked with providing consistent solutions across all of our schools—working together to make sure no one is on an island,” Sigvaldason says. While wireless connectivity has been an ongoing challenge in the rural division, incoming fiber services promise to improve online access, making tools that ensure security and simplify management - critical.

Just before the fall 2022 school term began, the division learned it would receive a device windfall: about 800 brand-new Windows laptops at no cost. But Windows devices weren’t going to integrate well in a division where students and teachers weren’t all-in on Google.

Sigvaldason and his colleagues used ChromeOS Flex to quickly and easily convert the devices.

The division’s schools are using Chromebooks and ChromeOS Flex for early years, along with a 1:1 Chromebook program for grades 4-12.

How Prairie Spirit champions blended learning

Before 2014, Prairie Spirit schools used the Windows operating system and Windows devices. Sigvaldason and his IT colleagues had heard good feedback from students about Google tools like Gmail; they then conducted a deep dive into the value of Chromebooks and Google Workspace for Education for Prairie Spirit. In particular, Sigvaldason liked the ease of use for students, staff, and IT, as well as the cloud-based management. He asked students for their opinions, and learned that most of them were already on Gmail and familiar with Chromebooks.

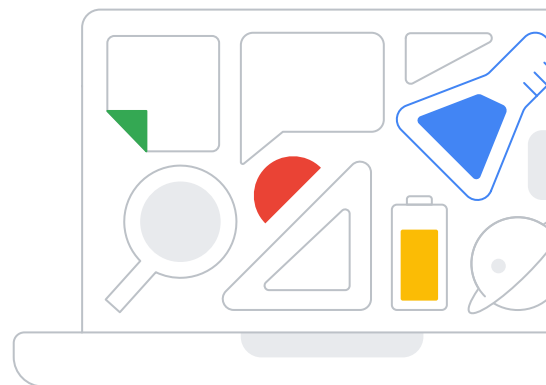
That exploratory process led to full adoption of about 2,300 Chromebooks for students and the division’s 350 staff, along with adoption of [Google Workspace for Education Plus](#). Teachers for grades 4 and higher assign student work through Google Classroom, with [Clever](#) as the digital learning platform for younger students. Sigvaldason sees the greatest impact on students and teachers involved in blended learning for rural communities.



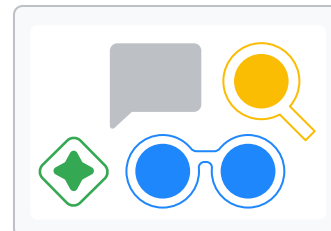
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"This is how we get creative to help students in these communities—helping keep bus rides shorter and encouraging that small classroom size," Sigvaldason says. "Our teachers do travel, and they're in front of kids at least once a week. Wherever they're teaching from, teachers find the Google tools to be easy, seamless, and collaborative."



Refreshing devices with ChromeOS Flex

In 2022, the division's budget had been frozen for six years straight, and there were few signs that increases would come from the provincial government. "We were also changing from a 1:1 program to a 2:1 program because we no longer had enough budget for more devices," Sigvaldason says.

The answer to maintaining a ChromeOS school division, Sigvaldason realized, was ChromeOS Flex. Where possible, Sigvaldason and his team converted Windows devices by using ChromeOS Flex. The process saved the division the cost of a new computer, while also making the converted device faster and more secure. The ChromeOS Flex devices could then be managed within Google Admin console through the cloud, right alongside Prairie Spirit's existing fleet of Chromebooks.

Creating a ChromeOS Flex assembly line

"Talk about an opportunity!" says Sigvaldason about putting several hundred brand-new laptops into students' hands. "This was a big learning boost for students who needed new Chromebooks, and ChromeOS Flex making the process easy was huge for us. Flex was our ace in the hole."

Converting all 800 Windows laptops took about two weeks with Sigvaldason and his three co-workers setting up a ChromeOS Flex assembly line.

As the devices were prepared for distribution among Prairie Spirit schools, they were added to the Google Admin console. "We manage the devices in the exact same manner that we manage a Chromebook—there really is no difference," Sigvaldason explains. "I can be standing in the middle of a wheat field and be managing a ChromeOS Flex device."

What they wanted to do



Swap out aging Chromebooks for new devices



Work within limited budget



Avoid downgrading the division's 1:1 Chromebook program

What they did



Converted 800 Windows laptops with ChromeOS Flex



Added the new ChromeOS Flex devices to the Google Admin console

What happened



Replaced about one-third of aging Chromebooks with the newly flexed devices



Supported the school division's blended learning program with the new ChromeOS laptops

2,300 
students

The division's schools are spread across a 70-square-mile stretch of the Manitoba prairie, and include 15 Hutterian Brethren colonies

2,300 
Chromebooks

Full adoption of 2,300 Chromebooks powered by Google Workspace for Education Plus, Google Classroom and Clever

38 
classrooms

38 connected classrooms accessing 30 ongoing courses via Google Meet

ChromeOS Flex devices save on time and IT upkeep

To students and teachers, ChromeOS Flex devices work just like Chromebooks. The converted laptops boot up in just a few seconds. And the ChromeOS Flex devices update automatically, saving time and travel compared with Windows devices, which had to be laboriously upgraded on-site and in person. The automatic updates also keep ChromeOS Flex computers secure and reliable. In fact, Sigvaldason saw virtually no support tickets after the ChromeOS devices were distributed.

Clever also works perfectly with ChromeOS Flex. Students use QR code badges that they hold up to the device camera to log in to literacy and numeracy apps. "They're learning in about 30 seconds, with no time wasted," Sigvaldason says.

"These are devices that ended up costing us about \$40 each to turn them into ChromeOS Flex machines, and they'll be valid until the end of the 2029 school year," Sigvaldason says.

But perhaps the best result was maintaining the division's all-ChromeOS device program, thanks to the windfall of new laptops.

"I didn't want to put non-Chromebook devices into the kids' hands and break up all the consistent work that we've done, and try to retrain teachers to work with the laptops," says Sigvaldason. "ChromeOS Flex was the answer, and it worked exactly as it's supposed to."

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