Data#3

St Mary's College Safeguards Staff and Students with Next-Generation Firewall Solution

A Data#3 Security Customer Story

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ST MARY'S COLLEGE

ABOUT ST MARY'S COLLEGE

Since its origins in 1868, St Mary's College has nurtured and guided girls from Kindergarten to Year 12, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to thrive in higher education and the workplace. The College's success has been supported by its ability to balance traditional origins and modern methods.

OBJECTIVE

As one of Tasmania's most respected educators, St Mary's College wanted to update its gateway security to promote the highest level of online safety for staff and students.

Inspired by a presentation by Fortinet at Data#3's annual JuiceIT event, the College investigated the necessity for real-time reporting and visibility to tackle the continually changing threat landscape.

COMMENTS

"Data#3 will always try to find a solution if possible or help in any way they can – any question we had was answered promptly, and someone with the right knowledge was made available."

Gerardo D'Amico, ICT Manager,
St Mary's College

APPROACH

Initially, input was sought from the incumbent, but when the proposed update lacked the features and capabilities that were needed, the College approached Data#3 as a trusted technology partner.

BENEFITS

- Greater control of content allowed through the firewall
- Increased control and visibly of traffic, leading to improved performance
- Reduced complexity and simpler management
- Increased protection for students, staff and systems
- Clear reporting, leading to greater understanding of online welfare in real-time
- A simplified management process offering greater visibility and issue resolution to maximise ROI.

TECHNOLOGY

- ☑ FortiGate 500E NextGen Firewall
- ☑ FortiAnalyzer

The Background

Since its origins in 1868, St Mary's College has nurtured and guided girls from Kindergarten to year 12, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to thrive in higher education and the workplace. The College's success has been supported by its ability to balance traditional origins and modern methods. To educate future leaders, it is recognised that advanced, secure access to technology is essential.

While St Mary's College's previous gateway technology gave a consistent level of security, the technology was due for renewal. The College's IT team recognised this as an opportunity to gain visibility of online threats and to meet the challenge of a rapidly altering risk environment.

The Challenge

With around 1,000 students and 150 staff, St Mary's College caters to a diverse range of online needs. For the IT team, protecting its users is of the utmost importance. When it came time to renew its gateway security technology, ICT Manager, Gerardo D'Amico, knew that updating to a modern solution was vital.

"We needed the confidence that our technology would protect students and staff on the school network, but our appliance did the minimum we were after. It would protect us from malicious websites, but we didn't have clear reporting on what was happening," said D'Amico.

"Our staff couldn't get much information about student usage, as reports were unreadable, and we wanted to be able to clearly identify what they were accessing."

The IT team compiled a list of the modern security features that were needed by the College. The aim was to enable safe online access for students to experience a modern learning environment. Inspired by a presentation by Fortinet at Data#3's annual JuiceIT event, the College investigated the necessity for real-time reporting and visibility to tackle the continually changing threat landscape. These capabilities simply weren't available from the gateway security technology that was currently in place and poor visibility of traffic was causing performance bottlenecks, and reporting was particularly problematic.

"It was time consuming trying to find the information we were after. Productivity was lost by the IT team trying to find data that just wasn't available. We really liked the Fortinet solution we had seen, and started gathering information," explained D'Amico.

Data#3 provided a FortiGate appliance to sit on the College's network for a few days, monitoring the environment and then provided a report that was an eye-opener for D'Amico.

"It gave us a view of the network flow and web actions in our environment, in great detail. It was easy to read, very legible. We saw for the first time a clear view of traffic – it impressed us a lot," commented D'Amico.

"Having that report, we identified things that we would never have picked up on the old appliance; we saw networking and internet access trends we could never have seen before."

Plans to update took a turn, however, when the College became aware that its existing licence was about to expire. The initial plan was to replace the gateway security technology over four days in the April school holidays, but with an existing provider unwilling to grant a short-term extension, the situation became critical.

"We had two options: stick with the existing technology or push on with the Fortinet technology ahead of our original schedule. We asked our Data#3 account manager for help on the Monday, and he had a machine on order and someone lined up to start the migration after hours on Thursday, continuing into the weekend," described D'Amico.

IT Outcome

With a fast turnaround, D'Amico was prepared for some challenges in rolling out the Fortinet solution, but the Data#3 and Fortinet team was up to the challenge.

"There was no hesitation – our account manager made a few calls and was able to reassure us that a unit would arrive and it could be done, and in the end, it went like clockwork," said D'Amico

"Together we worked after hours on the Thursday, until midnight on the Friday and all day Saturday. Amazingly it went flawlessly."

The upgraded solution was based on a Fortinet FortiGate 500E NextGen Firewall, a highly available platform that offers superior security visibility and welfare reporting. This was coupled with Fortinet's FortiAnalyzer, a powerful analytics-powered security and log management tool. Together, the solution ensures greater control of content allowed through, to give students and staff enhanced security when online.

The intelligence built into the Fortinet solution gives increased visibility of traffic, leading to increased performance, so that the higher level of protection does not come at the expense of performance. On the contrary, the firewall's ability to recognise and block threats quickly helps to eliminate bottlenecks that had previously frustrated staff.

"As an IT department it gives us the confidence we needed. We know the appliance is protecting staff and students on our network – we don't have to worry about the threats we know are out in the wild, because the FortiGate console consults with Fortinet's databases on known threats, and logs anomalies," outlined D'Amico.

After nine years with the previous device, D'Amico said that his team often found the dated device illogical in its use. The contrast was profound.

"While the old appliance interface was unappealing, FortiGate was very logical with configuration. For example, we can very easily change a web policy now. It is a lot more logically set out."

It is the advanced reporting and visibility, though, that impresses the IT team the most. Where before, significant time and effort may have eventually unveiled meagre information about websites visited, along with incomprehensible reports, it is now possible to identify in real time via 'clearly and plainly legible reports' when a user is at risk.

"We identified things we would never have picked up before on our old appliance. We saw networking and internet access trends we could never have seen before. This is granular level reporting that can identify the exact device or person accessing an app or site, and having that level of reporting makes our job easier," said D'Amico.

Business Outcome

The importance of maximum class time is well established, so avoiding disruption to students and staff is a priority for the St Mary's College IT team. Switching to new technology in such circumstances was, therefore, a leap of faith helped by a trusted relationship with Data#3.

"We would prefer to plan and make changes in the school holidays, but when staff and students came back on the Monday, everything went perfectly, everyone could get on the internet securely – it was one of the best outcomes we could have expected," said D'Amico.

One of the challenges of the previous device was, said D'Amico that it took a lot of skilled time to search for information. Even then, the available reports would offer 'pages and pages' of website hits, but little insight into online activities.

"It was time consuming trying to find what we were after, and productivity was lost in the attempt. It is wonderful having that reporting and that clarity now. The reports are so easy to read that non-technical staff can quickly understand them," explained D'Amico.

"Having access to that data was one of key outcomes we wanted. Other options we looked at provided reporting, but Fortinet provided ready-made education templates in the system without us having to spend hours customising reports."

Saving time is a welcome relief to the small, busy team of IT professionals at St Mary's College, as it allows them to focus more of their energies on delivering the education applications that offer the greatest advantage to students.

"We like to remain current with technology, and consider ourselves to be a leader in using technology to support learning. We are providing technology to students who will be the technology leaders of the future – they will take those skills with them into the workforce," said D'Amico.

Conclusion

When facing the unexpected, D'Amico said that the right technology partner makes all the difference. The 'perseverance' of Data#3 was necessary in pulling off the rollout of a modern gateway security solution at short notice.

"Data#3 will always try to find a solution if possible or help in any way they can – any question we had was answered promptly, and someone with the right knowledge was made available."

With new risks and threats emerging constantly, the College takes its responsibility to students and staff very seriously. Its aim of installing a modern gateway security appliance to deal with advanced threats was a key part in mounting a strong defence, and D'Amico is confident the FortiGate technology is up to the task, thanks to its ability to constantly update.

"The FortiGate firewall has automated visibility, so it can shut down unsafe traffic immediately. It is keeping our college community safe, 24/7."

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