

## Pear Notes Case Study

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### Background

Flint Hill School is a school for students in junior kindergarten to twelfth grade. We have about 1,100 students in our independent school in the Northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC. Several aspects of our rigorous college preparatory school allow us to stand out from similar private schools in our area. We embrace diverse learners at FHS. This means that more than a quarter of our students are formally diagnosed with either a learning disability and/or an Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. To support these students and their teachers, we have a staff of 13 learning specialists who work in the school's five Learning Centers. These learning specialists team with teachers, students and parents to facilitate learning and allow identified students to reach towards their potential by overcoming and compensating for their learning differences. Students who use our Learning Center thrive because they get both the academic challenge that their intellect thirsts for and the specific support they need to meet those challenges.

Another unique aspect of Flint Hill School is our use of technology. All students in our school have their own Ipad or MacBook Air laptop computers. Our younger



students (junior kindergarten to fourth grade) have Ipads. Everyone else has a MacBook Air. The school provides these devices. Starting in seventh grade, students may take their computers home with them daily. Teachers have had extensive training to integrate technology into daily instruction and into the curriculum. In addition, there is a staff of technology integration specialists who work with teachers and students on the use of technology for learning.

### A Dilemma

The combination of our extensive technology resources and the number of students with unique learning needs has allowed Flint Hill's Learning Center to focus a great deal of time and energy on assistive technology (that is, technology used to compensate for learning differences). We have also actively sought technology solutions to help our students with the tasks that are hard for them. Our students have access to dictation software, audio books, a wide range of organizational supports, remedial reading applications and so forth. It was in our search for supports for notetaking that FHS encountered Pear Notes.

Many of our older students (seventh grade and beyond) struggle to take notes from their teacher during class. This difficulty may arise for any number of reasons. Sometimes students process information they hear more slowly than their peers. This makes it hard for them to keep up with what their teacher is saying in class. Some students have weak working memories which makes it hard to hold information they hear or see long enough to copy it down accurately onto paper.

Yet other students have fine motor control problems that make their handwriting slow and/or illegible. Despite many years of trying a variety possible solutions (carbonless notebook paper and allowing students to tape record lectures, for example), we had not found a workable solution to help students take notes accurately. Pear Notes has helped many of our students with these learning disabilities compensate well for their learning problems.

Being able to record teachers and simultaneously take notes on the computer has been a tremendous support. While students with appropriate accommodations have always been permitted to tape record classes, few did so. It is embarrassing to deal with a tape recorder and place it well to record accurately. After class, it is cumbersome to fast-forward through an hour of class to find the precise moment when a teacher was discussing a point that is confusing. As a result, most students did not take advantage of this accommodation. Using Pear Notes allows students to use the computer they have (which is just like everyone else's computer so it doesn't stand out) to record a lecture. The ability to find the exact point in the lecture that is confusing and hear the teacher explain it again is invaluable. Moreover, being able to upload a teacher's PowerPoints or videos and annotate these with Pear Notes has enabled students to fully capture the classroom experience for study later on.

### Implementation

Students who find Pear Notes helpful are largely in grades nine to twelve. We introduce it in sixth grade, but there is little lecture and independent notetaking



required before high school. Students find Pear Notes especially useful in humanities courses. Some students have found it helpful to listen to lectures a second time; some use it to annotate notes after class. We have also encouraged them to use it in group work with peers. Taking notes in math and some science courses on the computer presents a challenge, so Pear Notes is not as useful there. We would love a solution for taking notes in math and science classes with heavy use of numbers and diagrams.

### Challenges

We have encountered several hurdles along the way to wider use of Pear Notes. The first stumbling block was helping classroom teachers become comfortable with the concept of audiotaping. We met with significant resistance initially. Working with department chairs and administrators, we were able to assure faculty that our Acceptable Use Policy would deal with students who misuse recordings (such as splicing recordings and posting them on YouTube). We also needed several conversations to remind faculty that students with accommodations for learning differences are permitted to tape record classes, even though few choose to do so. We were able to reach a compromise that only students with formal notetaking accommodations would be permitted to use Pear Notes in class. These students must secure permission from teachers in advance (although only once during the course—not every time they want to use it).

We also encountered difficulties within our own technology system pushing it out to students quickly and efficiently. When all students were provided with new computers in January of 2012, download problems were solved. Unfortunately, in the meantime, some students and teachers had given up trying to use it.

A few students found that they would prefer to use the audio recording feature built into Microsoft Word since this is a program they are familiar with and use frequently. Sharing Pear Notes has not been as easy as clicking the “Share” button, so some students use Microsoft Word and email documents as attachments.

### Summary

Overall, we have been delighted to pilot Pear Notes. Students who have learned to use it, love it. Now that we have solved the technology struggles and have greater faculty buy-in, we hope that many more students will use this application in the coming year.