

Virus disables Mounds View school district's computer system

Feb 19, 2009 (Pioneer Press - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) -- After catching a nasty bug, the Mounds View school district is working on computer safeguards to prevent another widespread infection.

A variation of a virus that disabled computer systems throughout the country struck Mounds View last week, affecting a majority of the school district's computers and servers. While no data, such as grades, has been lost, the district finds itself without computers to handle everything from grade recordkeeping to figuring attendance.

A team of staff, volunteers and consultants has been working around the clock to restore the system.

"We know we will have better machines and a more secure network when all of this is done," said Nick Temali, community education and technology director for the district.

Technology staffers are uncertain how the virus was introduced to the system. The district uses Symantec anti-virus software, but it didn't block the virus in time. The bug was discovered Feb. 10.

A variation of the virus has been a headache in other cities as well. The Houston municipal courthouse had to shut down earlier this month and cases rescheduled, according to the Texas city's officials.

Often, viruses enter a computer system through a flash drive, which can't be scanned for bugs on the school district's computers, Temali said. The district likely will install such a scanning program. In the meantime, use of the portable devices designed to store data won't be allowed on school computers.

And staff won't be able to download new software programs anymore without approval, Temali said. "I think we'll have a much tighter system," he said.

Since the discovery, a 12-person team has been working up to 15-hour days to fix the problems. The district's 3,500 computers have been reformatted and their 40 servers rebuilt. The district has about 10,000 students and 1,400 staff.

Staff computers should be up and running by the end of this week. Those used by students should be fixed sometime next week.

Up to 60 computers can be fixed simultaneously, Temali said. It takes about three hours to reformat a computer if all goes smoothly.

It's unclear how much the fixes will cost the district. Temali plans to look at overtime cards and collect invoices from consultants later this week.

"I can't even ballpark it right now," Temali said.

In the coming weeks, the school district will revisit its security software policies and practices to make sure "we are truly comfortable with the level of security we have," he said.

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3,500 Computers reformatted 12 People working 15-hour days to fix the problem 40 Computer servers rebuilt 9 Days since the virus was discovered.