Making a New Call Using VoIP

Charles County (Md.) School District
By Pamela Wheaton Shorr
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Many districts have discovered that VoIP can help lighten long distance budgets, but Charles County Schools is finding there's more to the technology than just saving money.

The Maryland-based district implemented VoIP about five years ago, says Lora Bennett, IT Manager at Charles County Schools. The transition was done as the number of available phone extensions dwindled and the PBX system needed to be replaced. Rather than invest in a new phone setup, the district did a test of VoIP, then eventually rolled out the technology across its campuses.

Finding more features: The initial goal, quickly reached, was to give teachers phones in their classrooms. Once that was in place, the district began looking into other features that could help faculty and administration.

Utilizing its Cisco end-to-end software and an application from LiteScape called LS ServicePoint for Education, the district is now able to access school directories directly from a classroom, issue notifications, and receive Amber alerts.

Better emergency calling: One of the most notable features is the emergency broadcast function, says Bennett. Teachers or administrators can call 911 from their rooms and the police or fire department can be dispatched directly to them, rather than having emergency personnel go to the main office first.

The system also sends an e-mail to local 911 dispatchers, for faster service. "This is a really big deal for us," says Bennett. "In the past, with traditional phones, police or fire would have to try and find a room, or be brought to one by someone in the central office. There's enormous security in having that direct link from a room to emergency services."

Another nice plus is an all-call feature that can put a voicemail on every phone, and light up the message button as well as include a note on the phone's screen.

More effective meetings: A feature that's due to be used more frequently in the future has proven to be videoconferencing, which was first tried during the fall semester in 2005 by Assistant Superintendent of Instruction Judy Estep.

By using cameras that plug into classroom computers, the superintendent was able to host video-based meetings that were just as effective as in-person conferences without the hassle and expense of calling teachers and administrators to the central office. Since

Charles County's district spans a large geographic area, some meeting participants would have had to drive at least half an hour just to get to a face-to-face talk.

During the 2006 school year, Estep began leaning toward using the videoconferencing more than in-person meetings, and scheduling shorter meetings that could be done quickly.

"Rather than calling an emergency meeting, or trying to fit everything into a long meeting, this helps to address issues without everyone missing half a day," says Bennett.

CHARLES COUNTY (Md.) PUBLIC SCHOOLS
No. of teachers: 1,677
District population: 2,935
Per-pupil expenditure: $9,783
Superintendent: James E. Richmond
District Web site: www2.ccboe.com

Pondering new strategies: She adds that there are more features to the LiteScape application than the district is currently using. For example, the software allows teachers to do class scheduling and attendance, but Charles County already has a Web-based application in place for those tasks. Still, Bennett believes that within the next few years, the district will begin exploring even more ways to tap into VoIP's robust capability.

Future broadcasting: "We're looking at mounting IP speakers in areas where there aren't phones, to use the VoIP network for broadcasting," she says. Speakers placed outside could alert teachers and students to emergencies like a tornado and bring them inside through a single call, rather than dispatching staff members outside.

The district has used this capability in a limited way, when a public announcement system went down at a school. Thanks to VoIP, there was no disruption of announcements, so Bennett feels it's a nice backup system to have, even if it's not implemented widely yet.

Looking ahead: "We know there's a variety of ways to use this system, and we've only scratched the surface," says Bennett. "We're excited to see what other benefits we can get from the system."

Elizabeth Millard is a freelance writer based in Minneapolis, Minn.

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