

Schools turn to unified communications to save money, streamline operations

From staff and wire reports

More K-12 schools, colleges, and universities are turning to unified communications as a way to streamline campus communication and save much-needed money in unpredictable economic times, a new survey suggests.

Unified communications is the convergence of enterprise voice, video, and data services with software applications designed to achieve greater collaboration among individuals or groups and improve business processes. Component technologies include video, audio, and web conferencing; unified messaging; and more.

The benefits that education technology stakeholders see in implementing unified communications are the same that executives in the government and business sectors see, according to the second annual Unified Communications Tracking Poll from CDW Government Inc. (CDW-G), which provides products and services to education and other sectors.

Fifty-four percent of school IT executives said reducing operating costs is the top benefit of unified communications, followed by increased productivity (50 percent) and more reliable communication (44 percent).

"IT executives report that economic pressures were a greater concern in 2009 than in 2008, but for many, the return on investment from UC deployments is so compelling that they ask, 'Why wouldn't we do this?'"

said Pat Scheckel, vice president of converged infrastructure solutions at CDW-G. "The result is reduced costs, increased productivity, and improved decision making—benefits that resonate across every industry, especially in a recessionary economy."

K-12 institutions, new to the tracking poll in 2010, see emergency notification as a key benefit of unified communications technology.

Of K-12 survey respondents, 39 percent said they were assessing their district's unified communications needs, 30 percent were planning an implementation, 18 percent had started implementing, and 13 percent had fully deployed unified communications.

School leaders in Indiana's Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation began to develop a strategic district plan and held more than 200 public meetings for community members, and installing top-notch communications technology emerged as one of five core focus areas.

"We realized that the first thing we needed was a solid infrastructure," said Mike Russ, the district's chief technology officer. "A key part of that was a good communications system."

Russ said the district had been installing a voice-over-IP (VoIP) system piecemeal as it could afford to do so, but decided to move forward with full implementation in the strategic plan.

Before, "teachers never had phones in

[their] classrooms, and it's also important for safety and security that teachers be able to communicate in case of a crisis," Russ said.

Teachers received wireless VoIP telephones that move easily as they change classrooms or attend to different bus or cafeteria duties. The phones also display messages on their screens. Voice mail messages also appear as eMails—so if a teacher's phone is not in reach but the teacher is at a computer, the voice mail message is instantly accessible.

Using Singlewire Software's Informa Cast, school administrators are able to broadcast a message directly to one or more teachers' telephone screens without making an announcement over a public address system—something that comes in handy in case of surprise early dismissals, Russ said.

The district also uses Blackboard Connect for external messaging and blasts reminders and announcements to parents and other stakeholders.

Russ said the district installed wireless infrastructure and access points, and then gave teachers their telephones and the proper training to go along with the new equipment.

The district has seen immense cost savings since it has implemented its unified communications system.

For example, the district has been able to eliminate most of its regular analog telephone lines, Russ said. The district left some phone lines intact for security purposes, such as alarm systems and elevator

operations, but is no longer paying per line, per month, year-round.

"I think we'll continue to see more benefits as we go along," Russ said.

The district's own IT staff now handles may issues that used to route to an outside tech company, such as its previous analog telephone company.

"Usually you have to have that company come in and make adjustments, because it's their equipment in your building, and you don't mess with that," Russ said. "Now, the nice thing is that... our own staff is handling all those issues that used to go to an outside company."

Russ said partnering with CDW-G on the district's unified communications installation also saved the district much-needed dollars.

"Most of us in K-12 don't have the luxury of having a huge staff of engineers. Partnering with CDW-G is a cost savings in a lot of ways, versus retaining someone on staff of that caliber," he said. "If we'd had to add staff because of this implementation, the cost savings would have been gone quickly."

Russ recommended that districts looking to implement a unified communications system plan ahead for as many years as they can. Most likely, new technologies will become available sooner than school leaders think, and the infrastructure being put into place now should be able to support those technologies whenever possible. 