School districts today are often being asked to do more with less and improve employee productivity at the same time. Given the costs and inefficiencies of traditional time division multiplex (TDM) telephone systems, it should come as no surprise: more districts than ever are putting “IP telephony migration” and “unified communications” at the top of their list of strategies. The Columbia (MO) Public School District faced that challenge. By migrating to NEC Sphericall, it is saving $250,000 per year on Centrex line fees. And that is just the beginning.

Challenges

“The number-one challenge for any school district is budget,” says David Kessler, manager, Instructional and Information Technology Services (IITS) for the Columbia District. Kessler, whose specific responsibility is network infrastructure and operations, joined the district soon after 1998, and is well aware of the budget issues his organization faced thanks to the traditional telephone system it had in place at the time.

 Solution

In 1998, the school district had NEC Sphere Communications, Inc. (formally Sphere Communications, Inc.) install its communications solution, NEC Sphericall. The open-architecture, pure-software, IP telephony solution is currently providing service to 30 buildings via 140 hubs. Kessler’s IITS department administers and services the system that provides service to approximately 2,800 terminals.

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SOLUtion (CONT.)

NEC Sphericall aligns well with the UNIVERGE® 360 vision in which the role of the individual employee determines the best communication method and technology. Clearly teachers’ communication needs are different from those of district administrators’. Thanks to NEC Sphericall’s open architecture, employees can have efficient, effective access to the people and information they need, regardless of their role. NEC Sphericall is flexible enough to unify all of the district’s communications.

Kessler adds, “NEC Sphericall has been running so reliably for so many years and yet, at the same time, thanks to software upgrades, it remains world class technology providing us with the most efficient and cost-effective communications available.”

Results

NEC Sphericall began making a positive contribution to district operations on the first day it was cut over. “We started saving taxpayers $250,000 a year in Centrex fees,” says Kessler.

NEC Sphericall enabled Kessler and his team to rationalize the district’s dialing schema. All district phones have five-digit extension numbers. The first two numbers refer either to a specific school or to an administrative building; the last three digits, to a specific classroom or office. For example, dialing the two-digit school number followed by 400 always connects callers to the principal’s office of that school. At school “17,” the principal’s office is “17400.” Likewise, at that school, the extension number to room “143” is “17143.”

“Our numbering schema is consistent across all schools,” says Kessler. “Parents are able to leave a message directly in a teacher’s voice mail box without disturbing the classroom. All they need to know is the teacher’s five-digit voice mail extension. For emergencies, administrative employees can easily transfer calls into a classroom simply by knowing the room number for that class.”

Administrative employees are the principal users of the Sphericall Desktop client. “They really like knowing who is busy and who is available before calling. It means fewer messages and less phone tag, which helps people stay in touch and streamlines the decision-making process,” says Kessler.

According to district main receptionist, Eileen Asbridge, NEC Sphericall enables her to answer more calls in less time. “I like knowing if someone is available to take a call before transferring it,” she says. “Sphericall Desktop saves me time and the caller time. I like seeing who is calling and how many calls are coming in at once. And if I miss a call, I just double-click on the number and I get them back in seconds. It’s so easy for me to use, I can’t imagine going back to the old system!”

Kessler reports that NEC Sphericall has greatly simplified telephone system management chores. Twice yearly—before school opens in the fall and before the start of the summer school session—IITS experiences a spike in the number of telephone moves, adds and changes. According to John Eddy, network and telecom specialist, “Sphericall is so efficient, it took two people only about a half a day to execute about 60 changes.”

Kessler points out the “copper wiring” advantage of NEC Sphericall: Even though it is a pure-IP telephony solution, he says, “When you migrate to NEC Sphericall, you can use the copper infrastructure already in place. That’s quite a savings!”

Sphericall’s open architecture means the district can purchase inexpensive phones over the Web rather than paying for high-priced proprietary terminals required by some vendors. “We have saved quite a bit of money over the years as a result,” says Kessler.

Service continuity is very important to IITS and the district. The district maintains six primary rate interface (PRI) lines, two at three central locations. In case a PRI goes down, NEC Sphericall automatically routes the call to the nearest working PRI so service is never interrupted. “When we have an outage, our users never notice,” says Kessler.

He adds, “NEC Sphericall has been running so reliably for so many years and yet, at the same time, thanks to software upgrades, it remains world class technology providing us with the most efficient and cost-effective communications available. That’s pretty amazing, but the truth is, most of the time, we take it for granted. It just runs! And that allows us in IITS to focus on other issues.”

Read more about NEC Sphericall.
Contact NEC to find out more.