Rural Oklahoma School District Keeps Parents, Teachers and Administrators **Connected With Cloud-based Unified Communications as a Service**

Pioneer Public Schools is a small, rural district in Chickasha, Oklahoma, about 60 miles southwest of Oklahoma City. The district, which includes about 400 children and one school, is fiercely committed to their mission that "every child deserves a quality education in a changing society." So although the district is small, the school does everything it can to support students' educational goals in every possible way.

Since the district employs just 43 people, the administration dutifully takes on multiple roles in support of those goals. Mike Sparks, for example, serves as both superintendent of the district and principal of the "little country school" that sits among a handful of district administrative buildings on a rural highway.

It isn't uncommon for parents to drive their children six to 10 miles to and from school each day, so the district's ability to communicate—with parents and the community outside of the school, as well as with teachers and administrators within the school campus—is paramount, for both practicality and safety. With the nearest first responders a solid 20 minutes away from the school, clear and reliable communication becomes even more critical.

To better manage the district's existing system of Smartphones, desktop computers and landlines—and to uphold their commitment to providing the best in communication and technology—Unified Communications as a Service (UCaaS) was a likely future solution for Pioneer Public Schools. But then a critical event accelerated the need for such a solution, and provided unexpected savings in the process.

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>
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> Superintendent and Principal of Pioneer Public Schools

Time to make a change

In the first few days of the district's new school year, a problem that had been plaguing the school for years resurfaced: The school's phone system crashed. Calls to and from the school were consistently dropped or couldn't be made at all.

"Parents were calling the school, but no one was answering," said Sparks. Teachers and staff were upset, and parents were worried about not being able to reach their children. "We knew we had to do something different."

Sparks and his staff tried to solve the problem with their existing phone service provider, but found themselves mired in work-order tickets and e-mails, and frustrated with a confusing system that wouldn't even allow them to talk to a human being. It was a turbulent start to the new school year, and Sparks and his staff realized they had to make changes; upgrading the phone system became a vital priority for the district.

Easy implementation

Sparks was initially worried about a cloud-based solution and the technological implications it might present without an IT person on his staff. His initial apprehension dissolved after working with a U.S. Cellular® partner, Crexendo, to create a plan for a hosted Unified Communications as a Service (UCaaS), using a cloud-based communication system that would work through the district's existing internet service.

Just before the holiday break, Sparks made the leap. He decided to implement the system and have it ready when his students returned from break. The timing led Sparks and his office manager, Brenda, to choose to self-install the system. Again concerned that his two-person team had no IT experience to lend to the installation, he was pleasantly surprised by how easy it was, and was thrilled to find the process—with remote guidance from a Crexendo service tech—only took about three hours.

When installation was complete, Crexendo handled all the system testing without the need for any district staff participation—and the district's new, seamlessly transitioned system was up and running successfully in less than 48 hours total.

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Customer Profile

Pioneer Public Schools, Chickasha, OK
- 43 employees
- 400 students

Solution
Unified Communications as a Service (UCaaS)
Favorite features:
- Call routing
- Outbound caller ID
- Voicemail to e-mail

Above and beyond expectations

Though Pioneer Public Schools' original need was a reliable phone system, the new cloud-based communication system provides much more than that. It not only helps support the district's promise to provide the technology that supports a quality education; it is also flexible and expandable, depending on their changing needs.

One feature the school has been able to take advantage of is call routing, a feature that connects a single phone number to multiple devices. "If a teacher needs to get ahold of me, they can ring my extension, and it goes right to my cell phone," said Sparks. This allows him to take calls no matter where he is—whether in the building or off school grounds.

Teachers and staff also have access to other UCaaS key features, such as outbound caller ID, which allows them to use a district or school number as the ID, keeping their personal mobile number private. Administrators also have the option of requesting a transcript of conversations between teachers and parents. This allows for more accurate record-keeping and assists in the development of educational goals for individual students.

In addition, the district now has a voicemail to e-mail feature, which captures voicemails and sends them to the user's e-mail inbox as well as to a Smartphone app for convenience and archiving. This is one of the features Sparks finds most useful. "When I get a voicemail, it sends the text to my e-mail, and to the app on my mobile phone so I can see it without plugging back into my phone," he explains. Being able to see a message, even in situations where it's not practical to play an audio message, lets Sparks instantly assess whether or not the call is an emergency.

UCaaS features like these elevate the district's simple need for reliable phones into an entirely new realm of innovative, cloud-based architecture, turning teachers' Smartphones into powerful Internet of Things (IoT) devices, and allowing for better communication with parents.

93%
of employees report increased productivity
as a result of unified communications[*]

Popular UCaaS Features
U.S. Cellular, along with solution partner Crexendo, offers UCaaS solutions with the following available options:

Video Conferencing
Real-time video with screen sharing and messaging for easy collaboration

Outbound Caller ID
Displays business number even when calling from your personal phone

Voicemail to E-mail
Turns your voicemails into e-mails for reference and easy search

Auto Attendant
Answers and routes calls to the appropriate person without a live operator

Instant Communication
Click-to-communicate feature and instant messaging for secure text chats

E-faxing
Paperless inbound and outbound faxing with status updates

Easy Integration
Can be integrated on existing VOIP phones and mobile devices via app, and works with most CRM platforms

Remote Device Management
Upgrade, configure and troubleshoot phones remotely, without the need for an on-site IT team

Bottom line: UCaaS pays off

The new UCaaS system has allowed Sparks to cross his district's phone system off his list of concerns—and as a bonus, it has also added back to his bottom line.

Sparks found that similar plans with other companies would have required nearly four times the initial investment that Pioneer Public Schools made to acquire their new UCaaS solution from Crexendo. With nearly 40 reliable VoIP-compatible phones now used by teachers and staff within the district—as well as several key features they didn't have before—the district is still paying less per month than it was paying previously for an unreliable, frequently failing phone system. The UCaaS solution allowed Sparks and his staff to control their spending and simplify their bill. What's more, their new system works.

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Building toward a brighter future

According to Sparks, this is just the beginning of what's possible for the district. They now have the opportunity for future use of web collaboration tools like video conferencing and web-based meetings. These UCaaS features offer ways to effectively communicate with other area schools. Cloud-based solutions can help support the meetings and communications required to support district-wide initiatives, such as benchmarking and student tracking, where collaboration is key.

For now, though, Pioneer Public Schools is enjoying the immediate benefits the new UCaaS has provided. The cost savings have allowed them to reallocate their funds to spend more money on other district needs. They've increased productivity and enabled easier collaboration on educational goals, because of the more efficient communication. And, importantly, parents can appreciate a new level of confidence in their ability to connect with the school now that the phone system is reliable. As a result, the district feels more secure, and there's a renewed faith in the school community among students and parents—allowing Sparks and his staff to focus on their true mission of educating the community's children.

UCaaS gives organizations the power to communicate virtually anywhere, on the powerful U.S. Cellular network that's purposely built where you live and work, in both city and rural areas. U.S. Cellular business solutions are backed by upfront training and continuing customer support during every phase of the process.

If your goal is a simplified communication system that doesn't take an IT department to run, UCaaS solutions can help get you there.

To learn more, call 1-866-616-5587 or visit uscellular.com/business/ucaas