

School District Improves Communications and Security



To prepare students for the new century, Elmore County Public Schools works with Cisco partner Information Transport Solutions, Inc. (ITS) to deploy Cisco Unified Communications.

Business Challenge

Elmore County encompasses approximately 620 square miles in central Alabama, and the Elmore County Public School System operates 15 schools with a total enrollment of more than 10,800 students. Although Elmore County ranks seventh in size out of Alabama's 134 public school systems, it is near the bottom when it comes to local funding for education. However, with enrollment growing by about 250 students each year, the Elmore County Board of Education embraced the need to update technology and to better prepare their students for the new century.

"Our biggest technology challenge was the many disparate systems, including network, phones, video systems, alarm systems, and intercoms," says Davis H. Brock, director of technology for Elmore County Schools. "Nothing worked together, and many pieces were very dated, making them expensive, and sometimes impossible, to fix." Brock and the district's technology team wanted to find a better solution that would allow for data, voice, and video to travel on one network. With the district's growth, mundane tasks such as the handling of messages for teachers and staff was becoming laborious and inefficient. Brock wanted all of the district's 1200-plus teachers and employees to have access to voicemail.

"Education is typically about 15 years behind business and industry when it comes to utilizing technology," says Brock. "So one of our biggest challenges was convincing the board members and the community that this investment needed to be made, and not just so the district would operate more efficiently. I really believed that in order to prepare our students for the new century and give them the skill sets that they would need for success in the job market, we had to spend money to upgrade our systems."

Brock knew that he needed a technology firm that would provide more than products and services; he wanted to work with a firm with which he could build a lasting relationship, and one that understood the struggles faced in the education sector and that would partner with him in his endeavors. He also wanted to work with a local company.

"We like keeping our tax dollars close to help support local industry," he says. For Brock, the choice of Information Transport Solutions, Inc. (ITS) was an easy one. A local firm that had worked with school systems and districts for a number of years, ITS understood Elmore County Schools' concerns about communication and the security of its students, and supported the schools' technology vision for the district and its students.

Executive Summary

Elmore County Schools

- Wetumpka, Alabama
- 1200+ Employees

Business Challenge

- Disparate systems create communications and maintenance challenges
- Tight budget for technology investment

Network Solution

- Converged voice and data network solution, with Cisco Unified Communications

Business Results

- Improved communication between teachers, staff, and parents
- Improved safety and security for all campuses
- Students better prepared to be competitive in the new century

Network Solution

Tomi Selby founded ITS after tenure with the U.S. Department of Defense, where she pioneered several key networking technology initiatives for Desert Storm. She also helped establish remote mainframe connectivity over IP networks Air Force-wide, which saved over US\$40M annually and helped drive the wide-scale deployment of IP networks at 135 bases worldwide. With her passion for technology and customer service, she started ITS in 1993 and incorporated it five years later. Today, ITS has 80+ employees and annual revenues of more than US\$30 million.

"Our goal is to provide customer service that is truly extraordinary," says Selby. "Our success is grounded in the belief that our customers deserve the highest level of satisfaction." ITS focuses on providing technology and integrity-based customer service, and strives to deliver technically sound and right-sized solutions. It has also built partnerships with best-in-class manufacturers and vendors.

ITS previously worked with Elmore County Public Schools in 2003, when it deployed a high-speed WAN and provided a fiber network to the district. With this bandwidth in place, ITS stayed in contact with the school district because it wanted to show how a converged voice/data solution could reduce the district's telecomm budget. The ITS team worked with Brock to develop a five-year strategic plan to prepare for a 21st century classroom implementation. District challenges included budget constraints and downward directed initiatives that required creative solutions on how to use technology to solve the problems.

Brock continued to meet with the board to show how the technology was about more than budget; it could improve the school district and help make the students more competitive. He started writing grants and talking to the board about how the district could better prepare students for the new century. ITS joined Brock in some of these meetings, explaining how the WAN foundation with a single-server location would improve access to data. Selby and her team also helped show how building on the technology foundation in place benefitted students.

"Brock laid a lot of groundwork for this project, and we understood and truly supported what he was embracing," says Selby. "It is difficult to engage students with technology if you haven't embraced technology at the district level. With the right technology in place, you can really engage students and support self-direction." She also wanted to help the district's administrators, principals, and central office staff to have greater access to real-time data, and get rid of the disparate systems for finance, student databases, and a variety of district-wide information. The Elmore County Board of Education approved a US\$1.8 million overhaul of technology for its schools. The effort would eventually include a new 6400-square-foot facility for the Office of Technology, and the replacement of more than

1300 outdated PCs. To address network connectivity concerns, every classroom, lab, and office was upgraded to a Cisco® 10/100 switch with fiber uplink connectivity.

The funds also provided for more fully utilizing the previous LAN and WAN upgrade by deploying a converged voice and data network solution. ITS recommended and deployed Cisco Unified Communications with Cisco Unified Communications Manager at a total of 18 Elmore County Public Schools locations. Equipment included 25 Cisco Unified Wireless IP Phones models 7920 and 7921G, and Cisco Unity unified messaging with ties to Microsoft Exchange 2003 for voicemail, wireless access, and core switching and routing. Cisco Security Agent and Cisco MARS (Monitoring, Analysis and Response System) were deployed to provide security. More than 1200 Cisco Unified IP Phones 7900 series were deployed for teachers and staff. To support Cisco Unified Communications, ITS deployed 18 routers and several Cisco Catalyst® switches. Cisco wireless access points were deployed to allow for wireless

Internet and secure network access. The existing video security systems were merged and updated to include IP-based cameras and controller servers at all locations to allow for the remote viewing of cameras and recordings using a Web browser.

Business Benefits

"I am so pleased with the outcome of this project," says Brock. "I always believed that a Cisco solution would give us the best long-term outcome of success. And with ITS doing the work, I knew it would be done right and with the very highest quality of service."

The deployment provides more reliable communication and improved safety with a Cisco Unified IP Phone in every classroom in the Elmore County Public School system. Messages on

note paper are a thing of the past; now every teacher has a voicemail, which has improved communication between teachers and parents.

Both Selby and Brock think that the safety and security measures provided by the new solution is the most important benefit; teachers and students are no longer isolated in classrooms with no phones; emergency messages can be broadcast over speakers to all or selected phones; and the improved video surveillance system enhances the school's stringent safety regulations. A recent return on investment study done by an independent company found that the Cisco solution is saving the district upwards of US\$275,000 a year.

"This solution has fundamentally changed how our staff, teachers, and principals are communicating with each other," says Brock. "Everyone is communicating quickly and effectively. It is helping everyone in the district to be more effective, and it is inspiring our students in new ways."

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