Chicago Public Schools convert phone lines to VoIP technology

By Jon Van
Tribune staff reporter
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Chicago Public Schools will switch to Internet-based phones at a cost of about $28 million in what is expected to be the largest such conversion of any U.S. school system.

The technology, known as voice over Internet protocol, which carries voice traffic and data over a single network, will save the school system money in operations, significantly reducing its phone bills, said Robert Runcie, chief information officer for the schools.

The changeover, which recently began, will be made by Mitel Networks Corp., based in Ottawa, Canada, and will stretch over four years.

VoIP technology will also provide public safety authorities with the ability to locate the precise room where each phone call originates, Runcie said, providing compliance with state requirements for finding the source of callers to 911 emergency numbers.

"We didn't have a strategy before for compliance," Runcie said.

The new technology will also provide teachers with voice mail, caller ID and other enhancements that will facilitate communication with parents and others outside the school system.

"This is a huge plus for parent-teacher communications," said Runcie.

With nearly 700 sites, 17,000 Centrex lines and 24,000 phones, the Chicago schools are a huge enterprise, and this will be the biggest conversion to VoIP of any school system in the United States, said Don Smith, Mitel chief executive.

"It's really a confirmation that large enterprises have embraced the technology," Smith said. "Today, about 95 percent of all the systems we install are VoIP. The tipping point came perhaps 18 months ago when VoIP overtook traditional technology for us."

Runcie said the new technology provides redundancies that should make it more reliable. If a contractor with a backhoe snaps a line going to a school, for example, the system can reroute traffic around the break to keep service operating.

As a further precaution, Runcie said that a few traditional circuits will continue to operate at each school so if anything happens to the VoIP system, there'll still be some connectivity to the outside world.

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jvan@tribune.com

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