

School Simplifies E-Rate Funding by Moving to Cloud Solution



Perspectives Charter Schools shifted from on-premises unified communications system to cloud collaboration solution.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Customer Name: [Perspectives Charter Schools](#)

Industry: Education

Location: Chicago, Illinois

Number of Employees: 2300 Students;
300 Employees

CHALLENGE

- Obtain reliable, high-quality communications services at low cost
- Simplify funding for communications system maintenance
- Help school staff collaborate across locations

SOLUTION

- Replaced on-premises voice system with cloud service based on Cisco Hosted Collaboration Solution (HCS) from Single Path
- Simplified E-Rate submissions by consolidating phone service and system maintenance under E-Rate Priority 1 funding request

RESULTS

- Improved administrative efficiency with advanced collaboration capabilities
- Improved agility by offloading maintenance responsibilities from small IT team
- Lowered monthly costs by approximately 25 percent, while increasing reliability and gaining new collaboration capabilities

Challenge

Perspectives Charter Schools operates five open-enrollment public schools, serving 2300 students in grades 6-12 in several Chicago communities. In 2012, 99 percent of the school's graduates were accepted to college, an even more remarkable accomplishment given that 90 percent of students qualify to receive free or reduced-price meals.

The school considers its voice system vital for administration, parent communications, and public safety. The existing on-premises Cisco® Unified Communications solution had been funded through the E-Rate program. "Voice quality, reliability, and ease of use were excellent," says Eric Heidrich, IT Director for Perspectives Charter Schools.

Having neither the time nor the expertise to maintain the system internally, the school's staff worked with an outside maintenance company. The problem was that maintenance for on-premises servers and software is considered an E-Rate Priority 2 expense. "E-Rate Priority 2 expenses are slower to be funded and the availability of Priority 2 funding is declining due to the overwhelming demand for Priority 1 and Priority 2," Heidrich says. Another drawback of maintaining the on-premises system was that an IT staff member

had to meet the technician at the server facility and wait until the problem was resolved, taking time away from other projects.

Solution

When the school issued a request for proposal for IT infrastructure, Single Path included Single Path Connect, a Cisco Powered cloud collaboration service based on the Cisco Hosted Collaboration Solution (HCS). Though Heidrich had not specifically requested a cloud collaboration solution, he recognized it as a way for the IT team to get out of the maintenance business entirely so that they could focus on strategic IT projects. “The cloud service



includes maintenance and is covered as an E-Rate Priority 1 expense,” he says. “Therefore, using the service would simplify our E-Rate application and help us receive funding sooner, alleviating our prior budgeting headaches.”

Now Perspectives Charter Schools no longer need any communications servers, just phones and a Cisco Integrated Services Router (ISR) to connect to the service provider. Administrators and staff use approximately 125

Cisco Unified IP Phones, and teachers can place or receive calls from their classrooms using PCs or laptops.

Some employees take advantage of advanced collaboration capabilities available through the cloud service, such as viewing voicemail as email attachments, and single-number reach. Later, Perspectives plans to provide every staff member with a mobile phone and single-number reach, making it easier for parents and staff to contact each other.

The transition from an on-premises communications system to the hosted collaboration solution proceeded smoothly. “Our partner Single Path took a snapshot of our settings, so we didn’t have to do any configuration work,” Heidrich says. “It was a smooth, turnkey cutover, and the user experience remained exactly the same.”

“I can’t put a dollar amount on the peace of mind that the redundant architecture in Cisco HCS gives me as Director of IT.”

— Eric Heidrich, Director of IT, Perspectives Charter Schools

The cloud collaboration solution is part of Perspectives Charter Schools’ larger plan to shift capital expense to operational expense by transitioning to cloud services. The school also uses cloud service providers for email and the student information system, for example. “Not hosting software on premises means one less thing to worry about, and we get high levels of service for a low cost,” says Heidrich. “If we can use a cloud service for the same or less money than an on-premises solution, we do it to save staff time and training costs.”

Results

Eliminated Need to Separately Fund Maintenance

Perspectives Charter Schools no longer needs to request E-Rate Priority 2 funding for voice system maintenance because phone system maintenance is funded as an E-Rate Priority 1 service. “The choice for educational institutions is to use a hosted solution, acquire internal skills to perform maintenance, or pay someone else for maintenance,” Heidrich says. “For us, the cloud collaboration service was clearly the best option. E-Rate has finite funds, and fulfils Priority 1 requests first.”

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Total cost of ownership for communications has dropped, as well. The monthly bill for the service is approximately 25 percent less than previous costs for phone lines, maintenance, software support contracts, repairs, and loss of productivity resulting from outages.

Relieved IT Staff of Management Burden

Perspectives' IT team no longer needs to wait with external technicians while they work on phone system



equipment, saving hours every month. Instead, Single Path takes care of all platform maintenance and feature upgrades. The school also receives the latest software features without any effort from the IT team. Adding users is also faster, because it is no longer necessary to purchase software licenses and to install and configure hardware. Instead, the IT team simply connects an IP phone and sends an email request to Single Path.

“Just two of us support 2300 students and 300 staff members across four sites, and if something plugs into the wall, we get calls about it,” says Heidrich. “With the

cloud service, the communications system no longer requires our attention. That’s very welcome and was a major factor in our decision to move to a hosted solution.”

Improved Staff Efficiency with Advanced Collaboration Capabilities

Adding new collaboration capabilities has become as simple as sending an email to Single Path, which implements the request in minutes. The school currently takes advantage of the voicemail-to-email and single-number reach features of the cloud service to increase administrative efficiency and staff productivity. “Advanced collaboration capabilities help me be more accessible to staff members and get back to them more quickly,” says Shawn West, director of human capital for Perspectives Charter Schools. “As a result, we’re resolving HR issues in less time.” Staff members also appreciate that single-number reach makes it unnecessary to give out their personal cell phone numbers, because calls to their office number also ring their cell phone.

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— Shawn West, Director of Human Capital, Perspectives Charter Schools

Added Resiliency

The school has enjoyed continuously available communications services from the first day that it used the cloud service. The E-Rate program does not pay for schools to purchase redundant hardware. But it does pay for the hosted collaboration solution, which has built-in redundancy. "I can't put a dollar amount on the peace of mind that the redundant architecture in Cisco HCS gives me as Director of IT," Heidrich says.

Next Steps

Now Perspectives Charter Schools is considering using a hosted Cisco TelePresence® solution, initially to offer virtual field trips. The idea is for students to experience destinations and hear from experts anywhere in the world, not just within an hour or two on a bus ride, while also lowering transportation costs. E-Rate currently funds infrastructure for learning applications such as virtual field trips, and later the school could use the same investment to reduce time and costs associated with administrators traveling to other sites for meetings.

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PRODUCT LIST	
Unified Communications	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cisco Hosted Collaboration Solution• Cisco Unified IP Phones 7900 Series	

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To learn more about Cisco Powered Services, visit: <http://www.cisco.com/go/ciscopowered>.

To join conversations and share best practices about collaboration, visit:
<http://www.cisco.com/go/joinconversation>.

To learn more about Perspectives Charter Schools, visit: <http://www.pcsedu.org>.



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