Customer Spotlight:
Whitmore Lake Public Schools

The transition to a new phone system can seem like an intimidating and daunting task, especially for smaller IT departments. Many customers tell us they delayed migrating their service until they experienced a problem with their existing provider, only to find that the transition was much smoother than expected. We know that it helps to hear directly from others who have gone through this experience to learn what it is like on the customer side of migration.

Recently, we talked with Karen Sterzik, Director of Technology at Whitmore Lake Public Schools to talk about their experience migrating their service to TelNet Worldwide, transitioning their faxes to digital fax service, and adding e911 to their system. We asked Karen to share some thoughts on their journey, from deciding to migrate to the installation to their ongoing usage.

What kicked off your decision to migrate services :
Like with most existing systems, when things are functioning, you tend not to think about what is running them in the background. What isn't broken doesn't tend to get fixed. But usually, minor issues start to build, and they eventually cascade into major problems, especially when there are compliance deadlines involved.
"We were having issues with our old phone service provider. They were not super responsive. One of our fax machines which is part of a copier requiring a badge swipe at our elementary school stopped working. We knew that something in the system wasn't communicating with it properly related to the phone line because the rest of the functions on the machine continued to work.
After months of back and forth, the two providers still blamed each other. It was a frustrating process. I knew that we needed to move to digital fax service, but I couldn't get a response on the type of service that would work for our needs."
"Around the same time, we also needed to add functionality to our system to meet upcoming deadlines for school e911 compliance."

How did you choose a trusted provider?
"Our old vendor made this seem like such a heavy lift. I had asked for a spreadsheet to follow or some guidelines to prep for the project. I relied on them to help me push this piece along and keep the project moving since this is well.
I am part of a cornhole league and spend many evenings and weekends around the same group of people in local games and traveling to tournaments. The cross-section of people in cornhole leagues is amazing. If you need something done or advice, put it out to your cornhole group because there is someone there that does it. I have leaned on my cornhole network for all kinds of personal needs, from tree removal to a new patio and fire-pit and pitch pads to a financial advisor. I trust this group, and they have never let me down. However, I never really imagined that there would be someone in my niche specific to serving school IT needs. So when a friend in our cornhole league introduced me to Parker and said you two should talk, I laughed and said, "You know not all IT people are the same, right?
He worked at BSB, a company I knew from attending ed-tech conferences. I also knew they were a platinum provider for our chosen phone system. But honestly, until I met him, I had back-burnered talking with phone providers.

When he started asking me about e911 compliance, I knew he understood my little sandbox of the IT world. I knew the deadline was looming, and I was having issues with my existing provider. So I asked questions about things I had been trying to solve. For the digital fax machines, he listened and told me that based on what I needed, they could have me up and working in 2 weeks. I had been waiting for over a year for responses from my existing provider, which led me to think the problem was bigger than it really was. I braced myself for the price tag. And it turned out that even with adding features and functionality, we could save money because BSB partnered with TelNet Worldwide for our services, and the prices were very competitive. Parker analyzed our services and said, "I think you are outrageously overpaying." We can go through TelNet Worldwide and add the features you need for e911 and save you money."

What are some of the e911 features you added for safety compliance?
"We had experienced some issues in the past that pointed out the gaps in our safety alerts. In our elementary school, a kid would call 911 just for fun. We had to stop everything and hunt and peck through the ticket to figure out who was away from their desk to deduce where in the building it came from to assess whether it was an actual emergency. Or was it just a kid trying to be funny?

Now we know exactly what phone number it came from and what the classroom number is, and the closest door location.

Now, if a classroom dials 911, the system automatically detects alerts what room or part of the school the call came from and additionally automatically notifies the secretary and the principal through the revolution system, which I love."

What was the migration to your new phone service and e911 activation like?

"Our old vendor made this seem like such a heavy lift. I had asked for a spreadsheet to follow or some guidelines to prep for the project. I relied on them to help me push this piece along and keep the project moving since this is their business, and they know how this works better than me. I am the only tech person for the school system. I came from the education side of the business and have been in this role for over five years. However, I still rely on my IT vendors, particularly on the networking side, to keep me informed on technical requirements and setups, especially when new laws are enacted. The materials TelNet Worldwide provided BSB for us made the transition so smooth. They saved me weeks and weeks of work. I didn't have to research what was needed. They helped me understand exactly what needed to be done and what additional capabilities we could add. The e911 spreadsheet was super easy for me to understand and complete and get the right details in place to give 911 from outgoing calls. I could talk with them whenever I had questions, and they were my expert set of eyes for reviewing all of my documentation. The team from TelNet Worldwide was also here, going from room to room with me to install and program everything. Through that process, they got to know our school system well."

How much of your time did it take to prepare for the migration?

"It took me about a day's worth of work to complete the materials and prepare, but that was spread over a week since I always juggle multiple projects. I did have good documentation for our phone directory, which is key. If you have a really good phone directory, then it is really easy. But if you have handwritten notes of who switched rooms or extensions, it will take you longer. If you maintain your directory and keep it up to date over time, it makes projects like this so much easier."

What was the migration experience like?

"On the day of the migration, It was super easy. We went to the conference room, and TelNet Worldwide started the process. They worked with me to test it and make sure the lines worked. I think all in that part took about 45 minutes. I remember sitting at the table thinking, "I know that port over is today in all reality. I don't even know what this really means. Do I have any responsibilities right now? They're like, Nope, we got it. I was like, oh, okay."

Is there a time you would recommend to other schools for migrating a phone service or a phone system?

"Yes. I always choose a time when the schools are not in session. For the port over during that process, your phones are out of service for a short window. We chose to do it before our secretaries came back after the summer break. After they return and the offices are open, we know we start getting parent phone calls. Even though it was less than an hour, it impacted fewer people since the offices were not open then." "For a new phone system itself, not just porting to a new service, I would recommend a spring break project, or even over winter break since a new phone system requires you actually to replace equipment and have to go in every room."

How has your ongoing service with TelNet Worldwide compared to your prior experience?

"Several months later, when something came up with our phones, I sort of held my breath. Oh no, the system was working before we did this. Did I break it because I didn't think of something super important? Problems never come up at convenient times. It's like a law of nature.

Of course, it was late in the day the first time we had an issue. It was similar to our original issue with the fax machine, where we couldn't tell which vendor had a problem. Was it stemming from our phone provider or our internet service provider? All I knew for sure at that time was that we had a problem that needed to be fixed before the start of school the next morning.

The first down moment on a new system wasn't something I had planned for. Here it was overnight, and I knew the clock was ticking. I put tickets everywhere, with BSB, TelNet Worldwide, and our ISD. The issue ended up being an ISD problem. They did something on our server. But TelNet Worldwide didn't finger-point and say it's not our problem. It's their problem, like our last provider. They helped me pinpoint the time and where the issue started, which helped me go back to our ISD with enough details to figure out what happened on their end and get the problem fixed."

"So often in a school, the phone service is just running in the background. It's one of the things you don't think about too often. Someone, for some reason or another, chose a service probably 20 years ago and no one ever thought to change it. The only time it occurs is when something doesn't work.

I know we are a tiny district, but that means even more. It's on me when something goes wrong. I have to rely on my vendors to be advisors and help so I can do all the parts of my job well. I have had such a negative experience in the past with other vendors I inherited, but with TelNet Worldwide, everything has been so seamless. Everyone seems so eager to help and make sure any questions or problems are resolved. They make sure we are happy and things or working. Honestly, I haven't had that experience from another vendor yet."

This article first appeared on the TelNet Worldwide website www.telnetww.com