How School IT Leaders Can Minimize Security Risks While Improving the Customer Experience

"Who owns customer service?"

This question has confronted school leadership and information technology departments for years, and it's only become more challenging in recent times.

The pandemic brought school IT to the forefront of the educational experience overnight as school district stakeholders demanded more access to teachers and administrators, even as education went virtual.

The near-universal adoption of email and social media have opened additional frontiers and presented new opportunities for direct and immediate conversation with families, students, teachers, staff, and broader communities.

As an IT manager, it can feel that an increasing share of ownership of these channels fall on you. More engaged stakeholders, greater access to technology, and the expectation of immediate response and instant communication translate to more demands of IT leadership — and with greater urgency than ever before.

Unfortunately, these advancements in technology and increased access to them opens both lines of communication *and* security vulnerabilities.

As a result, K-12 IT staff have more responsibilities and duties, more obligations to mitigate cyber risk, more potential for breach of access, and more stakeholders to serve than ever before.

"**School IT leaders are in a unique position to disrupt obstacles preventing families from accessing customer service and technology. By looking at the intersection of technology and communications, we can better understand their needs."**

— Zach Lind, Chief Information Officer Ithaca City School District (New York)

But no more hours in the day. All with shrinking staff, tighter budgets, and higher expectations.

Today, a decentralized web of complexity and muddled accountability presents new challenges as school districts experience an influx of communications through email, text messaging, website contact forms, social media, messaging apps, and other emerging technology.

In school districts, every staff member is responsible for delivering superior customer service — and increasingly IT is experiencing a disproportionate degree of responsibility for facilitating customer service requests that come in through web forms or ticketing systems.

In addition, administrators and frontline staff are experiencing the onslaught of inbound communications, and they're looking to IT to leverage and modernize systems and technologies to make things easier for all stakeholders.

Let's listen. Let's serve. Let's Talk!

The notion of "customer service" in public education, until recently, may have been something of a foreign concept. But that is quickly changing.

Throughout the pandemic, school districts learned families will quickly explore other options if dissatisfied. There were already a number of choices prior to the pandemic, but this trend accelerated as a growing number of alternatives to traditional K-12 public education became more widely considered. Private and parochial schools, charter schools, virtual academies, and even homeschooling have all gained favor and increased market share — in large part, at the expense of public schools.

Given "competition" in the "marketplace" — terms we might more closely associate with private enterprise — public school and district leaders need to increasingly think of themselves akin to companies competing for customers.

Both recruiting and retention are paramount. When students and their families leave school districts, enrollment declines and so does public funding. Revenue decline leads to tighter budgets and smaller payrolls.

And this is where IT leaders can fulfill their own priorities and objectives, and contribute to the bottom line. The top districts that keep their students, staff, and funding have one thing in common: They deliver a superior customer experience.

While superior customer experiences are not about one person or one department, IT can take a leadership position to help everyone in the district work together to deliver a positive experience for every stakeholder, at every touchpoint.

But this imperative comes with both pitfalls and potential. The good news is technology has opened more communication channels than ever before — making conversation more accessible and ubiquitous.

However, because communications preferences vary widely from person to person, from generation to generation, from cohort to cohort, everyone will choose to connect with a service provider in the manner and mode that suits them best, especially if it is unclear what the best and most efficient communication channel might be.

One parent may email a principal. The next may text a teacher. Another may post a comment on a school's Facebook page or message the district's Twitter account. Others may call the main office while also emailing three or four staff members because they are uncertain of who to contact altogether.

It's not that these parents are trying to keep you running or confuse matters. They simply don't know any better. They are looking for the most direct channel to get their message received and their issue resolved.

Unfortunately, they too often miss the mark, route the communication incorrectly, or include too many recipients. Meanwhile, busy teachers, frontline staff, and administrators may be confused as to who is handling the issue or even inadvertently miss an inbound message from a parent or family member.

These missed opportunities for meaningful dialogue create a scenario that leads to a greater disconnect between the stakeholder and school, as well as increased frustration that can lead to a parent exploring other options.

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The five drivers of superior customer service in K-12 education

The best customer service solutions for K-12 educators and administrators replace the disconnected, disparate, and disjointed tools that create more chaos and confusion than they do goodwill and problem solving. And the right tools can protect a school district's system and data from breaches and attacks.

Emails pile up and go unanswered. Phone calls are labor-intensive, time-consuming, and demand synchronous participation by both parties, limited by the hours that staff works. Social media posts and comments are public and wrought with landmines. Private messages aren't always fully monitored and bring ambiguity to ownership and accountability.

The most successful customer service platforms adopted by schools and districts are all-in-one, comprehensive platforms that enable two-way dialogue and foster stronger relationships between district and constituents. They replace the old way of doing business by bringing all channels into a single location that is optimized for handling customer questions and concerns.

Here are the five hallmarks of effective customer service IT leaders recognize and are beginning to integrate into forward-thinking school districts:
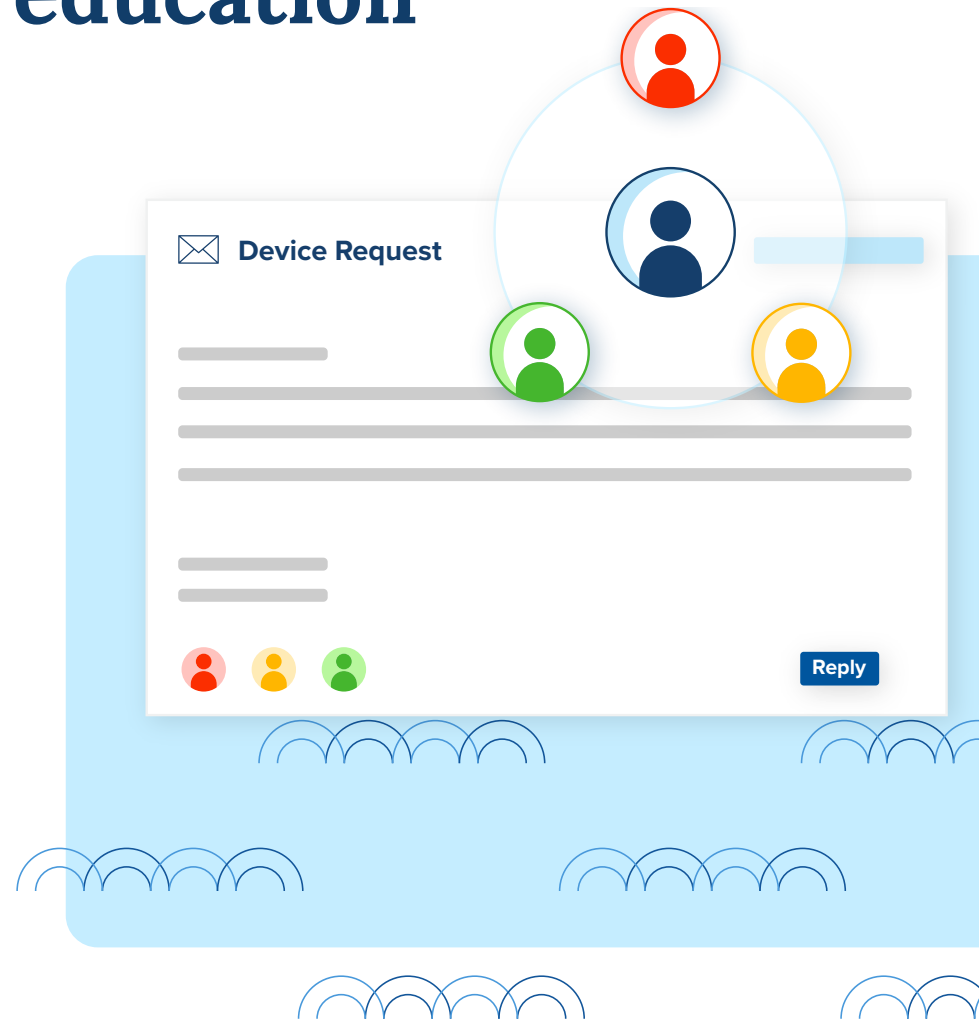
1. Singular and centralized

Not only is it difficult for staff to monitor and manage multiple communication channels at once, it can create confusion for the stakeholder making the inbound request as well.

Unsure of the best way to communicate and with whom, your customers will either guess or resort to the manner of communication that best suits their own behaviors. If you provide one clear channel for meaningful dialogue and issue remediation, and make that channel apparent and obvious, your customers will thank you for it.

A single system can centralize the decentralized, and alleviate the burdens of chaos and confusion for your internal team, all the while serving your external audiences in the manner of concierge.

In addition, user behaviors across all industries suggest people have a preference for self-service channels, if they are available, such as chatbots or a knowledge base.

Deliver effective and engaging customer service, easier and quicker, with a simplified, streamlined platform — saving school staff time, energy, and sanity.

2. Safe and secure

Publicly listing private email accounts on a website is an invitation to costly cyber breaches.

Email is one of the most targeted vulnerabilities hackers try to gain access to, with historically rudimentary and easily breached encryption conventions. All one needs to gain access to a staff member's email — and all of its valuable information — is an email address and a script that automates generated password attempts.

Email directories hosted on a district's website are also fertile ground for phishing attacks, whereby "robots" scan for email accounts to either hack into themselves, sell to black-hat operators on the Dark Web, or simply farm for future spamming campaigns.

Not to mention, too often a constituent will send the wrong concern to the wrong email address, or copy multiple addresses on a single issue — further clogging inboxes and again creating lack of accountability as to who "owns" the customer service request.

All it takes is one ransomware attack to change everything. Take your customer service system out of the inbox and into the 21st century.

In an effort to facilitate conversation with stakeholders, too many schools and districts are at the same time inviting dangerous risks in terms of network security and data vulnerability.
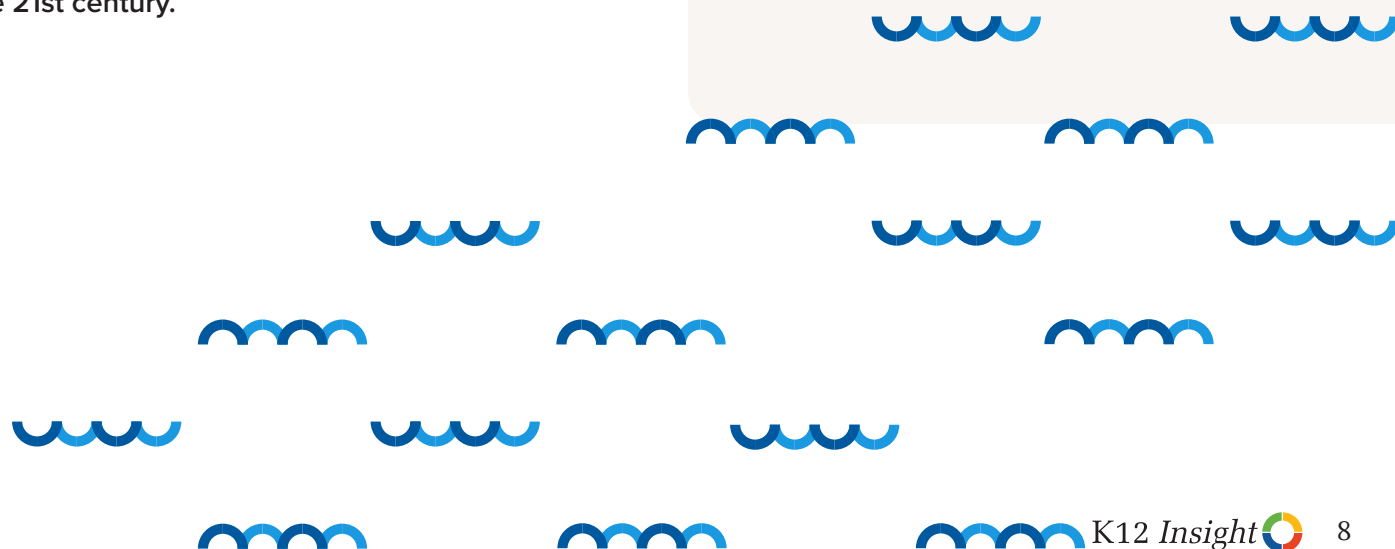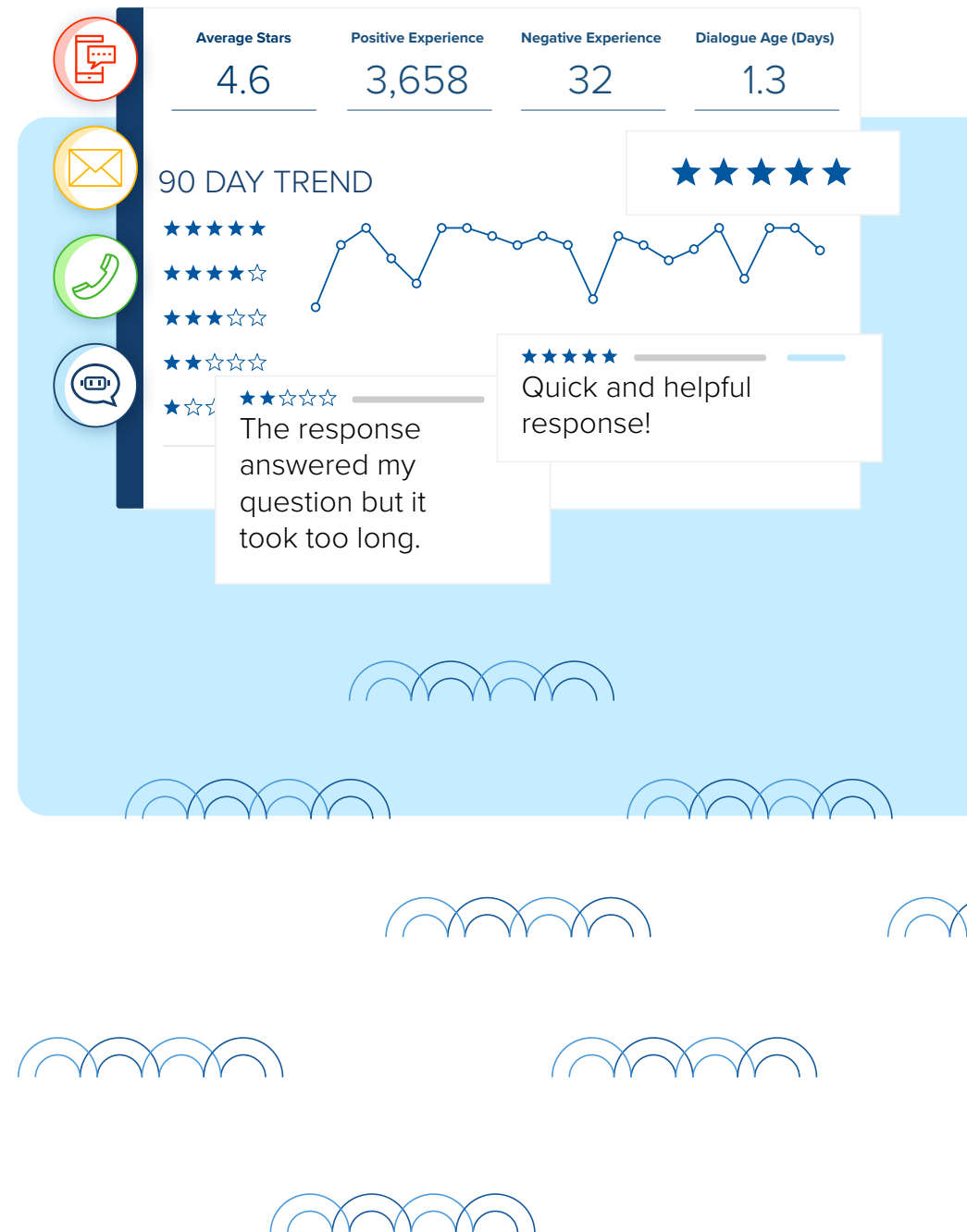
3. Simple and intuitive

Customer service technology should not feel like technology at all. The platform needs to appeal to all users and demographics, regardless of age, technology adoption, or user prowess.

The user interface and design should reflect simplicity and accessibility. There should not be cumbersome forms to fill out, multiple registration pages, or anything that gets in the way of providing service. If the user gets frustrated, disengaged, or confused, you will be achieving the opposite aim of the one intended, and further alienate the customer.

You will also be sending your constituents in droves back to the communication platform of their preference, returning everyone involved to "square one:" decentralized, disgruntled, and dissatisfied.

Remember, it's all about the customer experience these days. Good experiences get celebrated, remembered, and referred. Bad experiences also get remembered and often amplified — eroding trust in your school district.

Superior customer experiences demand accountability and confidence. Uphold your commitments to communication and engagement, and build community connection and confidence.

Average Stars	Positive Experience	Negative Experience	Dialogue Age (Days)
4.6	3,658	32	1.3

90 DAY TREND

★★★★★
★★★★☆
★★★☆☆
★★☆☆☆
★☆☆☆☆

★★☆☆☆
The response answered my question but it took too long.

★★★★★
Quick and helpful response!

4. Smart and automated

A customer service solution will only add value if it saves people time, reduces workload, increases productivity, enhances accountability, and delivers an outstanding customer experience.

School IT leaders are well aware of the time savings and enhanced accountability of the ticketing system, as you've been working with tickets and the systems that support them for years. Your colleagues might not yet be familiar with the benefits and efficiency gains, but they will recognize them once adopted.

Unlike emails that copy the entire staff, a customer service platform should have built-in rules and automations that route inbound customer service requests to the responsible and appropriate parties — and *only* the responsible and appropriate parties — for remediation.

There should be no ambiguity as to who "owns" a particular request, because the intelligence for triaging and assigning tasks and responsibilities can be programmed into the system. Such a system will automatically "forward on" the request to who should respond, and can assign deadlines, track activity, and even clearly demonstrate chain-of-command accountability to remove all ambiguity and serve as the prompt for response.

Email is labor-intensive and cumbersome. Let technology do the work of assigning tasks, recording actions, and reporting outcomes, so your team can easily serve stakeholders while remaining focused on their primary objectives and responsibilities — whether it be teaching children, managing district priorities, or optimizing educational outcomes.
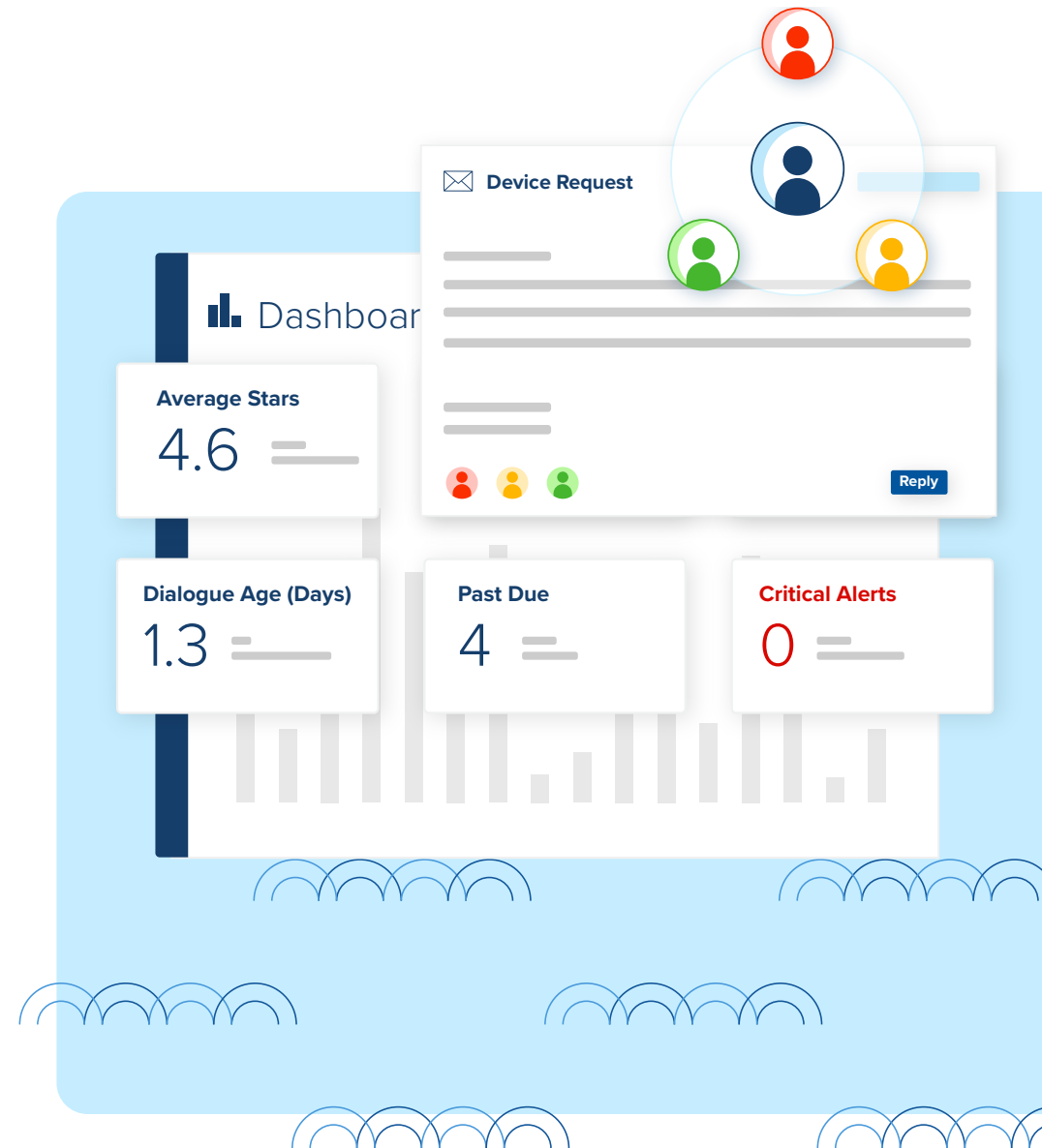
5. Accessible and universal

Once implemented, there should be no doubt where people need to go to get an issue resolved or question answered. Clear communication and transparent rollout is paramount. When in doubt, stakeholders will go to the school's or district's website, so be sure the system is plainly visible and easily accessed from the home page. Chatbots can take the lead in prompting inbound requests and routing issues, for example.

The solution should also seamlessly integrate with your existing internal systems as well, so there is no disconnect between the communication channel and the other drivers of internal workflow, processes and communication.

Most importantly, consider the multilingual needs and diversity of your constituent base. Multilingual communication is critical for school districts to ensure all families can access services and information.

Don't play hard to get. Be easy to reach. Use an accessible platform — as well as translation tools, a chatbot, and knowledge base — to deliver a superior experience to every stakeholder in your school district.
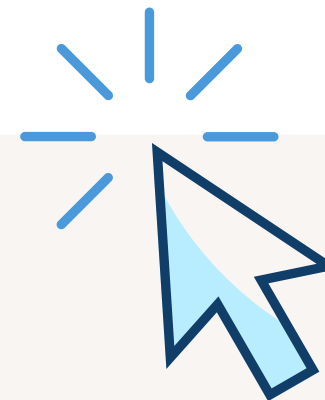
For educators and administrators, the stakes have never been higher. And the "customer" has never been more engaged. Parents, families and other stakeholders demand dialogue, transparency, and accountability.
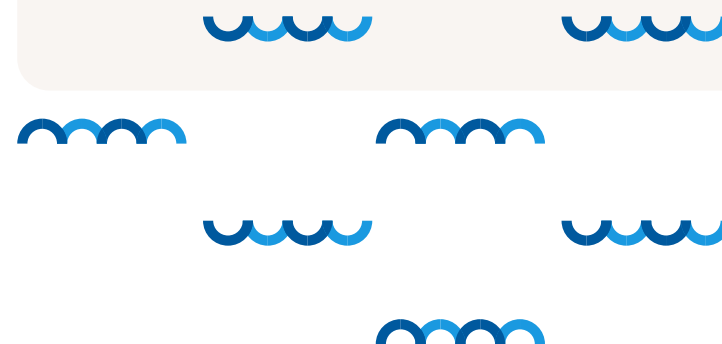
The Time Is Now

Technology has ushered in a new era for teaching and learning in the classroom with digital learning tools now an integral part of the K-12 education environment. However, many school districts are not yet equipped to deal with the emerging security concerns that have come with the increasing number of open digital doorways between stakeholders and the school district.

"In today's digital age, school districts possess large amounts of digital information about their students. Health information, children's progress, assessments. They have a responsibility to build trust. Communication is one place to do that," said Sheryl Abshire, a former school CTO, in a recent issue of *EdTech Magazine*.

Technology advances one way — forward. And it generally doesn't look back. Whether a school or district considers customer service a survival imperative or regards data security as a critical obligation and priority, the end result is the same: It's time to modernize our communications systems and methodology.

Your customers will thank you. Your colleagues will appreciate the time back in their day. And your leadership will recognize the gains in productivity and accountability. It's the win-win-win that keeps making returns on the investment in everyone's collective futures.

Since 2005, schools have experienced nearly 2,000 data breaches that have leaked nearly 30 million records, according to Comparitech — with California, Texas and Florida among the worst-hit states for the education sector.