



Northside schools are going wireless

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In approximately 16 months, the Northside Independent School District will be the largest school district in the state to be completely wireless, officials said.

"As part of the 2004 bond package, there was a line item to upgrade infrastructure," said Pascual Gonzalez, a spokesman for the district. "We want to upgrade our connectivity to the Internet and between the schools so that our students have another advantage in their education."

Kelly Smith, assistant superintendent for Technology Services in the district, said the technological boost has been in high demand.

"For months, our teachers and administrators have been asking for more Internet access for a variety of things such as procedural or instructional activities," she said. "There are many web-based applications used, and if they can get on the Internet then they can be mobile and still teach."

The district has a total of 100 buildings, including schools and support facilities, and covers approximately 355 square miles.

Gonzalez said installing the wireless network will cost about \$6.7 million and will be completed by about next fall.

"We looked at leasing or installing our own fiber-optic network but realized it was way too cost-prohibitive. Another option was wireless connectivity," Gonzalez said.

"We called to verify, and we will be the largest district in Texas to be totally wireless," he added. "The Houston, Dallas and Cypress-Fairbanks school districts are larger than us, and we checked with them, and they are not wireless."

The district's Internet service provider is Time Warner Cable. About 7,000 access points will be available after the wireless routers are installed across the district.

"Right outside my office door, there is a little blinking box on the ceiling that allows me to take my laptop anywhere in this building and be on the Internet," Gonzalez said.

"I don't have to be hard-wired and connected to the wall. You can go outside and get connected, which is great because it takes us out of the classroom and expands the learning environment for the kids."

Smith said only district laptops will be able to access the network, at least for now.

"It is something we want to get to, where students can bring their own laptops, but we will have to work on the security end of that so it is possible," she said.

"Another part of that is that the administration doesn't allow kids to bring cell phones right now, so we will have to have those discussions about policies covering those issues."

Smith said she sees the project as positive.

"Our emphasis is teaching and learning — and learning outside the classroom walls," she said. "This is a great thing, and we can't get it done fast enough."

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