

UK Schools Face Urgent PSTN, ISDN Upgrade

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As the UK's telecommunications sector accelerates towards a fully digital future, The School Supply Store & Network, the premier industry advocate for educational technology infrastructure, today releases an expert advisory urging school leaders to act decisively on upgrading from outdated Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) and Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) copper-based systems.

With the **national switch-off now confirmed for January 31, 2027**, following a delay from the original December 2025 deadline, schools lingering on legacy infrastructure face imminent risks of disruption, compromised safety, and missed opportunities for modernisation. This transition is not merely technical—it's a strategic imperative for safeguarding student welfare, enhancing operational efficiency, and embracing the digital tools that define 21st-century education.

Research indicates that legacy systems are increasingly unreliable, with potential for severe disruptions in public sector operations, including education. Upgrading to Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) or all-IP solutions now will not only avert crises but unlock transformative benefits that elevate teaching, learning, and administration. Schools that act proactively will thrive; those that don't risk isolating themselves in emergencies or falling behind in a connected world.

The importance of this upgrade cannot be overstated. The UK's analogue networks, which underpin everything from emergency alarms and lift phones to

payment systems and broadband in many schools, are being decommissioned to make way for more efficient, fibre-based digital alternatives. For the education sector, this means potential failures in critical communications could delay responses to incidents, compromise building security, or disrupt daily operations—issues particularly acute in rural or older school buildings still heavily reliant on copper lines. While exact figures for schools are limited, sector-wide data shows that only 18-26% of businesses have fully transitioned, suggesting a significant proportion of the nation's 24,000+ schools—potentially thousands, especially in the public sector where budget constraints have slowed adoption—remain vulnerable. Providers may issue as little as 90 days' notice for migration, heightening the urgency.

Beyond risk mitigation, the benefits of upgrading to VoIP are compelling and multifaceted, offering school leaders a clear return on investment, as evidenced by industry research:

- **Substantial Cost Savings:** Schools can reduce telecommunications expenses by up to 50%, eliminating costly line rentals, maintenance fees, and long-distance charges while freeing budgets for core educational priorities like classroom resources or staff development.
- **Enhanced Reliability and Quality:** Digital systems provide crystal-clear audio, reduced downtime, and greater resilience, with features like battery backups ensuring continuity during power outages—critical for emergency communications.
- **Scalability and Flexibility:** Easily expandable for growing institutions, VoIP supports remote access, allowing staff to handle calls from anywhere via mobiles or laptops, ideal for hybrid working or multi-site academies.
- **Advanced Features for Education:** Integrate with edtech platforms for virtual classrooms, video conferencing, auto-attendants, call forwarding, and voicemail-to-email, fostering better collaboration, parental engagement, and administrative efficiency.
- **Improved Security and Compliance:** Encrypted calls, enhanced emergency rerouting, and alignment with the government's digital strategy ensure safer environments and regulatory adherence.

Real-world examples underscore these advantages. Courtney Primary School transitioned to a VoIP telephone system, reporting improved flexibility and efficiency, including better mobile app integration for staff. Gravesend Grammar

School upgraded to a new VoIP system to meet growing needs, enabling seamless communication managed by in-house IT.

Chenies School in Hertfordshire modernised its telephone system with VoIP, enhancing overall connectivity. Frederick Bird School replaced outdated ISDN lines, achieving significant cost savings by consolidating rentals and retaining essential services like fax. These case studies demonstrate that upgrading isn't just about compliance—it's about empowerment, with schools becoming more resilient and innovative in digital education.

The School Network calls on all UK school leaders to prioritise an infrastructure audit immediately. Recommended actions include:

- **Inventory Assessment:** Map all PSTN/ISDN-dependent systems, from phones to alarms.
- **Provider Engagement:** Collaborate with telecom experts for tailored VoIP migration plans.
- **Implementation Roadmap:** Allocate budgets for fibre upgrades, training, and testing to ensure readiness by the 2025/26 academic year.
- **Resource Utilisation:** Leverage free guides from The School Network at www.theschoolnetwork.org.uk/digital-upgrade, featuring checklists, vendor partnerships, and success stories.

As industry leaders, we stand ready to support schools in this essential journey. The 2025/26 term is your window to build a future-proof school—seize it.

About The School Network

The School Supply Store & Network is championing technological advancement in UK education. Representing over 200,000 school leaders, we deliver expert guidance, advocacy, and resources to foster innovative, resilient learning environments.

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