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AT&T Unveils Managed RFID Service for School Systems

Telecommunications giant AT&T expanded its portfolio of RFID offerings last week with a managed service for schools. The solution comprises AT&T's cellular network, RFID asset tracking and a global positioning system (GPS) technology, and can be packaged in a variety of applications. These include

helping schools track and manage their fleets of buses, track bus-riding students, automate attendance procedures and lunch payments, and track mobile computers and other assets within the school.

Created for educational institutions (kindergarten through grade 12), the service includes designing, deploying and managing the solutions. Depending on the school system's needs, AT&T will help determine the most appropriate technologies, such as active Wi-Fi-based tags for tracking equipment, or ultrahigh-frequency (UHF) RFID tags incorporated into student and faculty badges for automated attendance procedures, or for ensuring students safely get on and off buses.

"In general, we are equipment- and network-agnostic, depending on whatever the customer's needs are," says Cindy Zanelli, AT&T's executive director of product marketing management. "We offer an end-to-end service. We'll sit down with the school system to find out what the pain points are, and what it is the school is trying to achieve. Then, we will architect a solution around that."

Any data collected, such as RFID tag reads as students enter a school or classroom, will be transmitted via AT&T's cellular network, which uses GSM (Global System for Mobile) communications technology. Schools will be able to access the data by securely logging into the AT&T Business Direct portal. The telecom company will filter the data and provide analytics as requested by the customer. "Every school system or enterprise has a different problem they are trying to solve, so they may need custom reporting," Zanelli says. "We can provide that, too."

According to Zanelli, AT&T is already working with several very large school districts, though she says she cannot publicly name them. One school system plans to implement the service to track children as they get on and off of buses

using RFID tags, and to track the locations of all buses during their routes, using onboard GPS receivers and GSM radios to relay the vehicles' locations and other information.

"This will help parents know that their children have gotten to school safely," Zanelli says. "And the school will know that each bus is performing as it should be—not speeding, not driving off route, that the proper maintenance has been done." Details, including the type of RFID tags to be used, are still being determined.

Available now, the managed service for school systems joins AT&T's other managed RFID service offerings, including one designed specifically for the health-care industry (see AT&T Debuts Managed RTLS for Health-Care Organizations).

RFID combined with GPS has already made appearances within school districts. In 2006, the Blue Springs School District began employing an RFID and GPS system to better track and manage the inspection and repair of its buses (see Missouri School District Puts RFID on Buses). That same year, Arizona's Tucson Unified School District tested RFID-enabled student ID cards used in conjunction with GPS units installed on school buses, to let administrators and parents know when and where children get on and off the vehicles (see Tucson Schools Considering RFID BusPass).



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