BUSINESS
connections

Partnering to Enhance Education

Pictured L to R: Adam Johnson, SkyLine Field Services Technician, Dennis Brown, Chief Information Officer - Avery County Schools, Brent Keith, SkyLine Strategic Sales Supervisor, Dr. David Burleson, Superintendent - Avery County Schools, Tim Miller, SkyLine Field Services Technician and Eric Hale, Network Engineer - Avery County Schools.

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Technology is improving the way businesses run. With so many options now available, technology can help your company become more effective in innumerable ways. This issue of *Business Connections* presents several diverse areas in which technology is making a big difference.

Managing Your Online Reputation may sound intimidating, but current tools like Google alerts and social media applications make it simple. Check out the details on page 3.
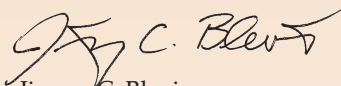
On pages 4 and 5, you can learn about our Business Spotlight customer, **Avery County Schools**, which is using iPads and MacBooks to offer a more diverse and flexible education to its students. SkyLine/SkyBest has been honored to help the school system in its important work by providing an efficient new VoIP system.

Next, on page 6, we tell you how **Network Convergence Streamlines Communication**. The ability to implement multiple solutions using a single, high-bandwidth network helps to reduce costs, increase productivity and improve organizational agility.

We encourage you to **Remember to Use 10-digit Dialing**. A new area code has been added to the area served by 336, giving us the ability to assign more phone numbers. Turn to page 7 for specifics on what this means for you.

SkyLine/SkyBest is always happy to explore technology options with you. Give us a call to let us know your needs.

Sincerely,

Jimmy C. Blevins
Chief Executive Officer

Cover photo by Todd Bush, www.bushphoto.com

Managing Your
Online
Reputation

What are people saying about your business online?

In business, bigger isn't necessarily better. There are advantages to being small, including the ability to provide service that's truly personal. As both businesses and customers move toward online interactions, this ability can be leveraged even further. As a small business owner or manager, you can easily monitor what customers are saying about you and use the information to provide better service. You can also use social media to foster strong connections that lead to more sales.

On the down side, any negative information appearing online can be harmful to your reputation. Fortunately, there are steps you can take to find out what people are saying about you, and to repair any damaging remarks.

Monitor

First, monitor the Internet for potentially unflattering information about your company. Use online tools to monitor social media sites, especially Twitter and Facebook. For example, you can receive emails when keywords you choose show up on Twitter, or when someone posts a comment on your Facebook page. Also, set up a Google alert for your business name and any product brand names; Google will send you email messages that show your online mentions.

React

If you find negative information posted on another website, ask the owner of the site to remove it. If he or she refuses, don't waste time trying to force the issue. Instead, create more positive information about yourself in order to push the negative comments down in search rankings, so it's less likely to be seen. Positive content can be added in the form of new pages on your website, press releases, articles and posts on other sites. You can also ensure higher search rankings by using search engine optimization (SEO) techniques.

Respond

Within social media sites and other places you can comment (such as blogs), respond to negative comments as soon as possible after they appear. Resist the temptation to reply with anger when someone criticizes your company. Keep the interests of your customers in mind and determine whether a public or private response is more appropriate.

Respond to positive mentions as well. Thank people who compliment your company, and engage them further by asking for an opinion or letting them know about new product offerings.

Whether positive or negative, look for patterns in customer comments and use them to guide the future direction of your business.

Participate

Actively participate in social media to establish relationships and a reputation as an expert in your field. Posting valuable information, deals, images or even just entertainment brings you closer to your customers. Remember that strong relationships on social media sites make negative information less likely to be believed.

Avery County Schools
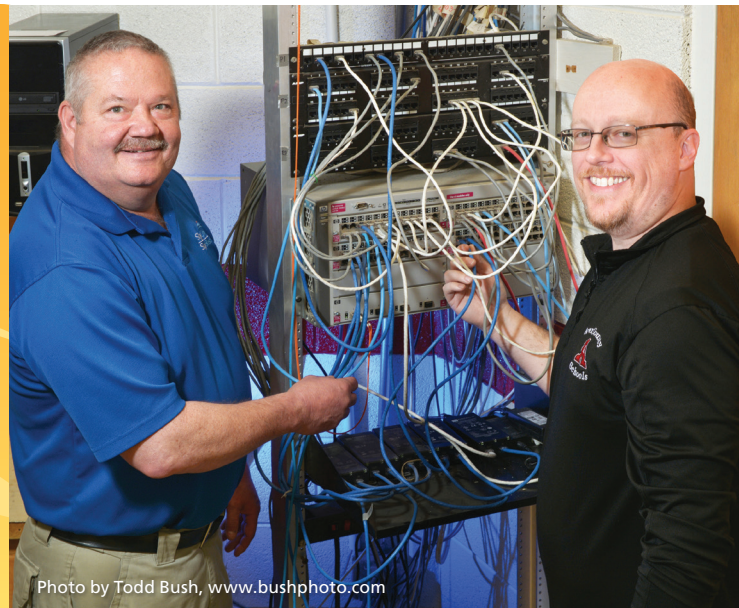
Improving education with student-centric learning

Photo by Todd Bush, www.bushphoto.com

The Avery County School District includes over 2,100 students and prides itself on its one-to-one computing initiative. All students—from elementary to high school—are provided with an iPad or MacBook to utilize. These devices enable individual instruction while giving students access to courses online.

Personalized Learning for Better Results

One of the formal beliefs of Avery County Schools is, "Children are our greatest resource," which is why the system ensures each student is given an equal opportunity to learn in a safe, nurturing environment. A student-centered education process, using familiar electronic devices, addresses individual needs and engages students for better outcomes.

Superintendent Dr. David Burleson comments, "The one-to-one computing initiative has a tremendous impact. The technology enables individual instruction and access to online courses that would be otherwise unavailable." Specifically, students can learn Mandarin Chinese or take Advanced Placement courses online. "Students and parents have access to technology they never dreamed possible." Chief Information Officer Dennis Brown adds, "The one-to-one initiative enables parents to view their children's grades, assignments and study materials. We're excited about the positive changes and hope for even greater gains in the future."

The school system takes advantage of the program's flexibility to enable learning for students who have dropped out of school because these students take a majority of their courses online. The Blue Ridge Academy program was selected by the North Carolina State Board of Education two years ago as the Most Innovative Program of the Year and in 2015 was awarded the Governor's NCWorks Award of Distinction as an "Outstanding Innovative Partnership."

Providing Student Opportunities

Burleson notes, "At the inception of our one-to-one initiative in 2011, we were the only district in North Carolina known to have a one-to-one initiative in all grades, K-12. Some school districts have one-to-one programs, but most are grade specific."

In addition, Avery County High School includes three academies: a ninth grade program that helps freshmen assimilate into high school; a Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) academy; and a comprehensive high school. The district's vision is to become a national model

of education. Brown notes, "STEM Project Lead the Way is helping our middle and high school students prepare for robotic competitions. Even two of our elementary schools are involved in robotics, and we hope all five elementary schools will be offering it soon."

Besides a comprehensive education, Avery County Schools provides its courses in a positive, friendly environment. The schools offer personal meetings with parents; and students and parents can meet together with a counselor during the registration process. At the end of every year, parents and students are asked to complete a survey and provide anonymous feedback.

Burleson notes, "We also work hard to make our schools as safe as possible with officers at the high school and middle schools, and cameras at the entrance of all schools with a buzz-in system." Brown adds, "We're in the pilot stage of a project sponsored by the Governor's Crime Commission called Speak Up, which provides students with a smart-phone app that lets them anonymously post concerns about bullying, weapons or other dangerous situations."

Connectivity Is Essential

For its technology to work smoothly, Avery County Schools needed a strong, reliable infrastructure, which it chose SkyLine/SkyBest to provide. Brown notes, "We had an open-source-based VoIP system for several years that we outgrew, and support for it was virtually non-existent. We felt exposed and weren't sure how quickly our telecom system could recover if something happened."

The recently installed SkyLine/SkyBest Mitel VoIP system provides consistent service and stability, which is essential for efficient communication with staff and parents. Burleson notes, "We can now retrieve voice mail remotely, and transferring calls is much simpler. We no longer worry about losing calls. SkyLine deployed the whole system in one week-end, which took a lot of coordination. In addition, SkyLine has been a tremendous partner in providing grant money for technology in the classroom, helping with the one-to-one initiative and being responsive to our needs."

Brent Keith, Strategic Sales Supervisor at SkyLine/SkyBest, notes, "We've been a long-time partner with Avery County Schools and are becoming more involved in their mission-critical infrastructure needs. It's a very progressive school system that fully embraces technology, and we know how hard the entire staff works to keep Avery County Schools in the forefront of education innovation."

SkyLine Supports Avery County Schools

SkyLine has given technical and financial support to Avery County Schools for many years. Specifically, says Strategic Sales Supervisor Brent Keith, "We have provided both telephone service and Wide Area Network (WAN) functionality for the Banner Elk Elementary School."

In addition, the school system has been the recipient of SkyLine's technology grant awards since 2006. The program includes initiatives to extend Internet access to students who need it at home due to special circumstances, such as health-related issues. Since 2006, a total of nearly $500,000 in grants has been awarded.

Public Relations Administrator Karen Powell states, "Avery County Schools has received a total of $80,000 in grant awards to fund technology in the classroom. Funding has gone toward the purchase of SMART Boards and related equipment, and, in more recent years, to support the county's one-to-one initiative. When the focus was on SMART Board-related equipment, SkyLine also hosted teacher training sessions led by SMART-certified trainers."

Photos by Todd Bush, www.bushphoto.com

> " **SkyLine has been a tremendous partner in providing grant money, helping with the one-to-one initiative and being responsive to our needs.** "
>
> — DR. DAVID BURLESON, SUPERINTENDENT, AVERY COUNTY SCHOOLS

Network Convergence
Streamlines Communication

Voice, data and video integrate on one IP-based network

Network convergence, also called media convergence, is the coexistence of voice, data and video communication within a single Internet Protocol or IP-based network. Historically, these communication services were developed in isolation, and businesses treated them as separate entities that were not expected or designed to integrate with each other. For example, a building would typically have dedicated equipment and wiring for each function. Now, with network convergence, it is both feasible and practical for a business to implement multiple solutions on a single, high-bandwidth network, resulting in many advantages.

Cost Reduction

By eliminating redundancies, network convergence reduces the infrastructure costs associated with maintaining separate communications networks. For example, the California Academy of Sciences (CAS) saved more than $2.3 million in material costs and more than $875,000 per year in recurring costs by making all of its systems IP-based on a single data network. (For CAS, network convergence was part of an overall green mindset that also included architectural design and use of clean energy.)

In addition, businesses can reduce management expenses by creating operational efficiencies that streamline business processes. The ability to consolidate two or more distinct network operations within an organization naturally leads to cost reductions through the more efficient use of employees, technology and property, as well as having

fewer vendors. A single converged network can also resolve many time-consuming IT management issues, such as providing users with security access across all systems with a single password.

Increased Productivity

A converged voice and data solution boosts productivity by allowing employees to use a broader range of network accessibility options and information media. By providing all employees with the same access to tools such as conferencing, unified messaging and web-based personal assistants, the employee's business objectives can be accomplished more effectively.

Organizational Agility

Network convergence can increase opportunities for a business by allowing faster expansion and adaptation. It supports new technologies and applications as they become available, and makes it easier to change functions as the needs of a company change. Responding to new market opportunities is made simpler and less expensive.

As network convergence continues to evolve, major challenges will confront network developers. Sheer demand for increased bandwidth is perhaps the most significant. More sophisticated applications and the exchange of increasingly rich content could cause network resources to become overwhelmed. One key to effective network convergence, therefore, lies in the design, installation and maintenance of adequate hardware.

Ashe & Alleghany Customers:
Remember to Use 10-digit Dialing

Get ready to change the way you make local calls

336
743
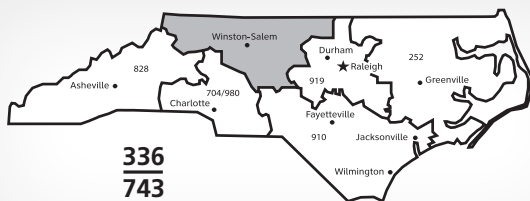
To ensure a continuing supply of telephone numbers, the new 743 area code has been added to the area served by 336. This is known as an area code overlay, and it comes with a change in the way you dial local calls. Keep in mind that the overlay won't require you to change your existing area code or telephone number—but it will require you to dial 10 digits for local area calls.

The affected area includes Ashe and Alleghany counties. Generally, it also covers the Piedmont area and includes High Point, North Wilkesboro, Winston-Salem, Greensboro and Asheboro.

To complete local calls, dial area code + telephone number. This means that all calls in the 336 area code that are currently dialed with seven digits will need to be dialed using area code + telephone number. The same dialing procedure will apply to telephone numbers assigned using the new 743 area code. However, the price of local calls made today by dialing seven digits will not change when 10 digits are dialed for the new overlay area code.

IMPORTANT: If you dial 1+, you will be charged for a long-distance call. Ten-digit dialing only includes the three-digit area code + seven-digit phone number.

You can begin using the new dialing procedures immediately any time you place a call from the 336 area code. For now, and if you forget to use 10 digits, your call will still be completed. However, beginning **April 23, 2016**, if you don't use the new dialing procedures, your calls won't be completed. Effective **May 23, 2016**, new numbers may be assigned the new 743 area code.

You can still use three digits to dial 911, 211, 311, 411, 511, 611, 711 and 811.

Please call 1-800-759-2226 with questions about the new area code overlay.

Directory Drive Helps Support Schools

With the recent delivery of the new regional telephone directory, please give your old telephone directory to a school in your community for the 24th annual Directory Collection Drive, sponsored by SkyLine. Seventeen area public schools are participating in this year's drive, and for each old directory collected, SkyLine will donate 25 cents to the participating schools.

Throughout the calendar year, SkyLine also receives directories at its Customer Service locations in Banner Elk, Seven Devils, Sparta and West Jefferson, with credit given to the schools. The drive officially runs from January 1 through March 31. Since the program began in 1993, SkyLine has donated more than $113,000 to the schools for their efforts. Please support recycling and our public schools through this special initiative.

For a list of participating schools, visit http://bit.ly/1LtDzJa. For more information, contact your local SkyLine/SkyBest Customer Service Center at 118.

SkyLine SkyBest

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Internet
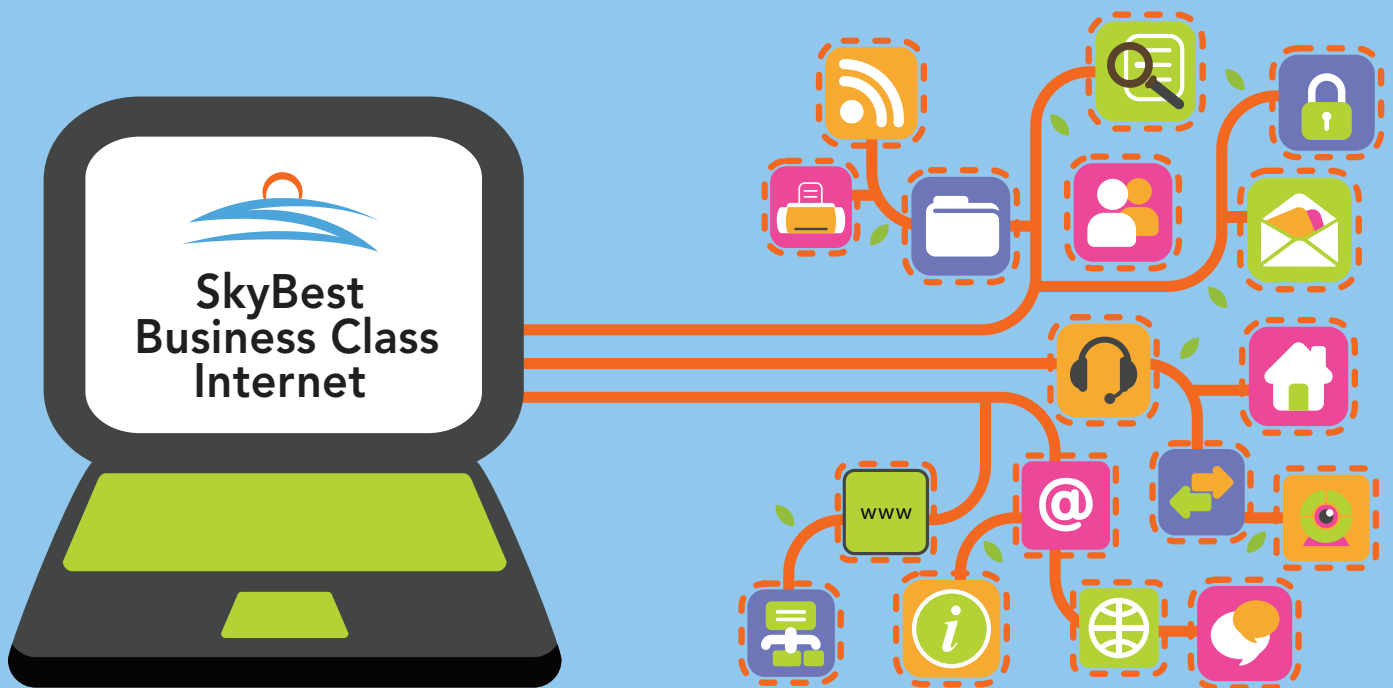
Contact an Inside Sales Coordinator to find the best options for your business needs and build a customized solution that fits your budget. Choose your Internet speed up to 100 Mbps!

Robin Miller   Hollie Brown

1-844-SKYBEST   BusinessSolutions@skyline.org