



# St Columba's Comprehensive

Three passes the test with phone and payments upgrade for Donegal school.



Near the edge of the Blue Stack Mountains in a scenic corner of County Donegal, St Columba's Comprehensive faces similar challenges to many schools all over Ireland, between making its budget stretch as far as possible and finding ways to manage payments for school activities. Here's how it managed to accomplish both tasks.

## Challenge

Located at the picturesque meeting point of two glens in County Donegal and just a few kilometres from the Atlantic Ocean, Glenties has a population of just over 800 people. The secondary school in the heart of the town has more than 380 students, St. Columba's Comprehensive is a co-educational secondary school which has served its community since 1968. The school has 16 feeder primary schools throughout the surrounding area.

Like all schools, St Columba's has to manage its budget carefully. Before it buys a single marker for a classroom, it has several fixed costs to pay including electricity bills, heating oil, fire and security alarms, as well as fixed-line rental and phone charges for three separate landlines. So the school is always looking at ways to make savings that can be invested in essential educational tools. "I'm in my ninth year as principal. All I have known is cutbacks, austerity and trying to stretch. We look at our costs in every way to find savings," explains Frances Boner, principal at St Columba's.

Glenties' picturesque surroundings belie a tough economic picture: the area had seen high unemployment and migration. One bank in the catchment area closed after the recession while the other went cashless, which made it difficult for parents to access money to pay for their children's various activities during the school year. St Columba's operates a book rental scheme for all its students, which meant that the school would be processing orders and handling thousands of euro in cash. For the school administrators, handling the money, issuing receipts, and lodging the cash at the nearest ATM was a time-consuming job which came with an additional security risk of handling large sums of cash.

## Solution

In October 2018, St Columba's took step to managing its costs by moving its fixed-line telephony and calls to 3Connect, Three's cloud-based Voice over IP phone system. This way, it removed its costly dedicated phone lines while keeping its existing contact numbers. The school uses its existing internet connection provided through HEAnet to handle its calls. As part of the system, the school also received new Panasonic deskphones.

An added advantage of 3Connect is that it is easy to route calls to specific numbers and even to mobiles outside normal working hours. It is easy to manage online, with data that provides visibility of and insight into device usage and calls associated with each one.

The upgrade was scheduled for the summer months so there would be no disruption to classes. "The beauty of 3Connect was it was so attractive in terms of costs and it delivers. The installation was done quickly and with minimum interruption. Three gave excellent support and any initial teething problems were dealt with very promptly," says Frances.

After a positive experience with Three, the school then looked into managing its payments and decided to use Way2Pay, Three's cashless technology designed for schools. After a successful trial, St Columba's will begin using the technology from the 2020/21 school year onwards. Administrators can use Way2Pay to send scheduled SMS reminders to parents at a certain time of the day, and parents can pay quickly and conveniently from their smartphones with just a few clicks, while the system automatically send receipts by text or email to parents. It also helps parents to budget and pay at a time that's convenient for them.

## Benefits

St Columba's goal was to save money by installing 3Connect; it achieved this and more. "We analysed the phone bills for the last three years and we saw that made a saving of 30% on calls since we switched. That is a significant saving and it excludes the payments for the equipment," says Frances.

School administration is now much easier to manage. "We get a lot of calls because we have so many feeder schools, so 3Connect allows the front office to streamline the calls and route them to the most appropriate person, whether that's the career guidance counsellor or the special educational needs coordinator," explains Frances.

Frances believes moving to Way2Pay will make a big difference in school administration, saving on staff time and removing a security risk of handling cash. "We have saved at least two and a half days in reduced staff admin time, standing at desks, and preparing receipt books. Parents can pay in advance and go straight to collecting books without going to the front office first. That's all time saved."

St. Columba's embrace of technology is no surprise; it underwent a huge refurbishment and extension programme between 2006 and 2008. It is one of the schools chosen to introduce Leaving Certificate Computer Science from September 2020 onwards.

Three has also provided St Columba's with a Samsung Flip that combines the features of a touchscreen, projector, and high definition display that lets teachers show files and pictures, share them with the class, and make notes directly on screen. "We appreciate the opportunity from Three to try out the Samsung flip screen and look forward to further developing technological skills in the school," says Frances. She adds that the support from Three over the past two years has helped ensure everything runs smoothly. "The backup we had from Three was hugely important. They gave great attention to us – even with small things."



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