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BEST PRACTICE

## Getting It Right

Mass-notification systems allow schools to contact parents immediately with accurate and vital safety information.

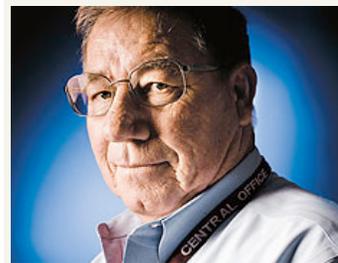
*Karen D. Schwartz*

Whether it's an impending snowstorm, a criminal on the loose or a gas leak at a school, it's imperative for K-12 officials to disseminate accurate information as soon as possible, especially to anxious parents.

That's why more school districts are implementing mass-notification systems — automated programs that provide real-time information to parents and school personnel through recorded and live voice messages, e-mail alerts and text messages. According to CDW•G's 2008 School Safety Index, nearly half of school districts today use such systems.

Finding the right system for your school district can be difficult; these three examples show how each district carefully considered its needs and made sure its choice fit.

“What you choose will depend on many things, including the capabilities of your in-house staff, what everyone is comfortable with, and the types of notifications you plan to communicate,” says Rob Arnold, an enterprise communications analyst with Current Analysis, a market research firm based in Washington, D.C.



With 18 schools spread over 800 square miles, Dennis Morris of Alabama's Jackson County School District needs his mass-notification system to have a broad reach.

TAMARA REYNOLDS

### Jackson County's Concerns

For Jackson County School District in Alabama, the decision came down to which technology could reach everyone in the widely dispersed school district, where 18 schools cover three mountain ranges.

“For us, the most important thing was knowing our customer base, including what technologies they were comfortable with and where they were located,” says Dennis Morris, senior network administrator for Jackson County.

Because the school district is in a rural area that spans 800 square miles in the southern Appalachian Mountains, many more households have phone service than Internet hookup, dictating that a phone-based mass-notification system be used.

The school district chose to combine an existing Cisco fiber-optic network that links all 18 schools to the district's headquarters with a Cisco Voice over IP (VoIP) phone system and InformaCast, a mass-notification system from CDW Berbee. The InformaCast system allows the school district to push out either live or prerecorded voice and text messages to multiple IP phones in every classroom, as well as leaving voice messages for every parent if necessary.

“We needed a way to notify parents in case of emergencies, but we also wanted the ability to just notify a subset of parents if, for example, a snowstorm affects classes in only one or two schools,” Morris explains.

### Fairfax's Flexibility

Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia put flexibility first when choosing its mass-notification system for internal use.

“We wanted to be able to deliver messages in many forms to smart phones, pagers, cell phones and e-mail, and we wanted the flexibility to allow us to structure messages the way we wanted to,” says Fred Ellis, director of the school system’s Office of Safety and Security.

Fifteen percent of respondents to a 2008 CDW•G poll said they used text messaging during emergencies. In Florida, where severe weather is common, this number jumped to 56 percent for residents under the age of 29.

The school system’s focus at the time was on internal communications — the ability to notify key school personnel during any type of emergency. For that purpose, it chose a series of solutions that could deliver alerts in real-time in various modes, and that includes both an enterprisewide messaging platform and voice-dialing features for internal alerts and personnel notification.

“We needed the flexibility to deliver messages anywhere and at anytime,” Ellis says. “I could send a message from my BlackBerry while in a movie theater, and it would be sent to the groups I specify. And if it’s really important that I reach a specific person, it even has an ‘acknowledge receipt’ feature.”

Customization also was key. “Say I need to create a group of people for a specific event. I can create it immediately and continue to use that group for the entire event. When we have severe weather, we may need to contact all electricians, for example,” Ellis explains.

### Shelbyville’s Web-Based System

Fast and accurate notification was a top consideration for Shelbyville Central Schools, an Indiana school district with almost 4,000 students in grades K–12.

To address issues from inclement weather to changes in everyday activities, the school district installed a web-based system that allows schools to send up to 100,000 messages in 15 minutes and 6,400 text messages per minute, via a variety of media, from land lines and cell phones to pagers and e-mail.

Because it was imperative for parents to receive important messages, Shelbyville went with a system that allows parents to access the system securely to add devices, such as extra e-mail addresses or pager numbers, says district spokesperson Kim Owens.

Shelbyville Central Schools’ insistence on a mass-notification system that offers multiple means of notification is a smart move, Current Analysis’ Arnold says. “Go with a product that offers multiple layers of notification, so not only will parents get a message at their home number that school is letting out early because of bad weather, but the system will simultaneously call multiple numbers for the parents or send an e-mail to their work e-mail address or BlackBerry,” Arnold says.

Despite the temptation, don’t overuse your mass-notification system, advises Arnold.

“If you overuse it, the recipient can become desensitized to it,” he adds. “If you’re trying to communicate more mundane information, like a change in the school lunch menu, use less invasive notification methods, like prerecorded messages or e-mail.”

### Boston’s Big Case

Mass-notification systems have been adopted by many schools, colleges and cities recently, but one of the biggest tests of such systems came this summer when a 7-year-old girl was kidnapped in Boston’s Back Bay area.

Using TV, radio and other forms of communication, Boston law enforcement officials were able to spread the word quickly about the missing girl, Reigh Boss. The notice paid off, as officials got more than 200 tips from the public, and determined that the girl’s father, a man who went by the name of Clark Rockefeller, had allegedly kidnapped her at the end of a custody visit.

After the girl’s mother wrote a plea to her former husband and posted it on YouTube, Rockefeller was arrested in a Baltimore suburb and the girl was found unharmed. Once the man’s actual name, Christian Karl Gerhartsreiter, was revealed, police said he was a suspect in a 1985 disappearance and presumed murder of a California couple.

—Wayne D’Orio

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