

An Urgent Message

By Teresa Anderson

When a student from the Westside Union School District in North Los Angeles County went missing last year, Superintendent Regina Rossall knew just what to do. After receiving a request for help from local law enforcement and obtaining permission from the child's parents, Rossall sent out a message on the school's emergency notification system. The message contained a description of the student, along with details of his disappearance and contact information for police.

The parent of another student who had received the alert from the school spotted the boy alone in a local supermarket the following day. Police returned the child, frightened but unharmed, to his parents. According to Rossall, the happy ending was the result of three years' research, training, and testing by the school district and its approximately 775 staff and faculty members.

The Westside Union school system covers around 345 square miles near Los Angeles and houses 9,100 students in 11 schools that offer instruction from kindergarten through eighth grade. The majority of students in the school district have parents who commute to Los Angeles daily.

An emergency alert system is extremely important because of difficulty reaching parents through indirect channels, such as radio or local television announcements. "We wanted a system that would allow us to communicate with parents on a routine basis and also during an emergency," says Rossall.

The emergency communications procedure at the time, a phone tree, was time-consuming and unreliable. The school district had the option of establishing a mass-calling function through its existing communications system, but that would take eight to nine hours to complete.

Rossall set out to find a product that would help the school get both routine and emergency messages to faculty, staff, and parents quickly. First, she talked to neighboring school districts. She found that they all had the same system from a local vendor. Though the other schools were pleased with the system, Rossall decided to investigate newer systems offered by national companies.

After researching products and getting demonstrations from several companies, Rossall found that all of the systems were similar. She selected the Instant Alert system from Honeywell, headquartered in Morristown, New Jersey, because she liked going with a recognizable brand name and having a national support team.

The system has a password-protected Web interface through which school administrators can enroll parents and type in messages to be sent via e-mail. Rossall and other employees authorized to send messages use a toll-free phone system to record voice messages. Honeywell maintains and protects the database and sends out the messages.

When each child is enrolled in school, the parent is automatically enrolled in the alert system. Parents are asked to provide e-mail addresses as well as home and cell phone numbers. The system uploads changes to the database twice a day.

To send a message, authorized users call an 800 number, enter a passcode, record the message, and designate when the message should be sent out. When the parents receive the call, they first hear a computerized voice indicating that the message is from the school. Then, the sender's message is transmitted.

Each message is also typed up and entered onto the Web site to be sent out via e-mail. The alerts are delivered to all subscribers within 15 minutes of being sent.

The user can also designate a specific group to which the message will be sent. For example, school principals can correspond with staff as well as parents, and school district officials can communicate with teachers and staff throughout the entire district or at a combination of schools.

The school can give each message a priority, which changes the way it is delivered. Routine school activity notices might be delivered to just one phone number—either home or cell—per student, but an emergency call is delivered to every contact number or e-mail address provided.

While the school will not discuss the system's exact cost, Rossall says that the service is similar in price to other emergency alert systems she considered. The annual service cost is based on the number of students enrolled. Because the system's greatest costs come at setup and it costs little to add more students, the average price per student drops as enrollment grows.

The school is satisfied with the system's performance, but Rossall notes that it is not as user-friendly as she had hoped. "It took us close to a year to get everyone trained," she says.

The school also requested system changes. When Rossall purchased the system, the only option for telephone messages was a computerized voice. Rossall felt that during an emergency, parents would want to hear the voice of a school representative. Honeywell worked with the school to implement this feature, and now all messages are recorded by the school official sending them.

Honeywell also helped the school set restrictions on the time of day that messages could be sent. One teacher accidentally sent out a routine message at 9:30 p.m., upsetting parents. Now, those sending routine messages must select a time within a predetermined range.

In addition to helping local police find the lost student, officials have used the system several times to notify parents of unscheduled school closings. "One of our schools is very close to a prison," says Rossall. "So when the sheriff locks down the school, we can warn parents."

Before they had the system, parents would bring their children in and would find out about the closing from a loudspeaker announcement. Though the school is not always able to catch parents before they reach the school or put their children on the bus, Rossall notes that the new system is a vast improvement over the old one.

**** For more information on how to obtain an emergency notification system; please contact a Securi-Tech representative today at 1-866-933-3022.**