

Schools have easy way to send out alerts

Automated telephone systems alert parents to snow days, special events

By by Scott Hilyard

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DUNLAP — Earlier this month, Assistant Superintendent Lisa Parker called everybody in the Dunlap School District at 5:30 a.m. to tell them that there would be no school that day because of the overnight snowstorm. It took about a minute to get the personally directed word out.

"To record a message you log into the Alert Now (brand) system, and they give you a phone number to call and record your message," Parker said. "You can preset it actually the night before and then activate when appropriate."

Dunlap might be the latest school district in the area to conform to a growing trend: use of an automatic telephoning system - Alert Now and Global Connect are two commonly used systems - that alerts students and their families of any variety of school events. A week after Parker announced school was canceled for the day, she called and let parents know that grade progress reports had been mailed out.

Similar systems are used in a variety of ways in Peoria, Limestone, Elmwood and Illinois Valley Central school districts, to name a few.

"We have had it for two years, and most others have, as well," said Elmwood Superintendent Roger Alvey. "There are several different systems out there. We use Global Connect."

In Dunlap, the system can sort out who receives the message in large and small groups. It can alert a basketball team that practice has been changed to a different hour or everyone in the district of a snow day. Each school in the district has the ability to send out its own messages to the families of the students.

Dunlap's superintendent, Jay Marino, said the alert systems are beginning to show up in districts everywhere.

"I would say that it is becoming common practice, but isn't fully implemented in all schools yet," he said. "Along with our district blog and other Web 2.0 technologies, the Alert Now system is another means of communicating with staff and parents to keep them informed of key school events, announcements or school closings. Communicating effectively with our staff and stakeholders is critical to the success of our school district."

Currently, the Dunlap system is only capable of sending out recorded messages to telephone numbers and leaving the message with someone who answers the call or to the answering machine or voice mail system. Soon the system will expand and be able to leave a text message on a cell phone or an e-mail account. At that time, Dunlap school district residents will also be able to opt out of the system, although school emergency messages override the opt out, and every number will receive those messages.

"That will be ready to go in a month or so," Parker said.

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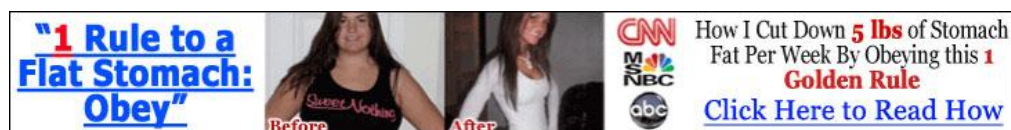
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