

Lamar Co. Schools Aim to Improve Contact System

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The Lamar County school district is working to improve communication with the parents of its students by implementing a new message system.

Superintendent Ben Burnett noticed early in the year that there were multiple inclement weather alerts for the Lamar County area. He knew the schools needed a way to communicate with parents in case students had to be released early.

Johnny Downs took over from there.

An 18-year veteran in the school district who now serves as the assistant superintendent for operations, Burnett said Downs took the initiative to find an acceptable message system for the school district to use.

"We are using a system called School Messenger, which is a mass calling system we can use to provide a thread of communication between schools and parents," Downs said.

Downs said the program is capable of making 10,000 calls per minute.

"It can call five numbers per child; in case we have to get in touch with parents, we can use the emergency numbers we have," Downs said. "Parents now have a greater way to get in touch with us with cell phones where it used to be just calling at home or work. This gives us the opportunity to call more numbers."

Debbie Dabbs, principal at Oak Grove Upper Elementary, said she sent out a few test messages to parents to ensure the system worked properly. So far, she has had very few complaints about the system.

"The biggest upside to the system is that it's very user friendly," Dabbs said. "And we can contact any configuration of people and give them a very quick and thorough message and confirmation of whether they received the message."

Previously, Dabbs had teachers implement a much more lengthy process to let parents know about last-minute announcements from the school.

"We had a pretty good system we used a couple times. I gave teachers a phone tree that they could utilize a few parent volunteers and the volunteers had a list of phone calls to make or the teacher would have to make the calls as quickly as possible," she said. "But to have this new type of communication, it's beyond comparison."

Dabbs said the principals in the district decide when to send out messages to parents.

She said she attended a meeting that gave principals in the district step-by-step instructions to send out messages, and then they were encouraged to make a few test runs.

Dabbs said while the ability is there for teachers to send messages, there is only one user set up at her school.

The Petal School District has been using the School Messenger system for more than a year now, and Superintendent James Hutto said the district has run into only one problem with the system.

"The major problem is that people change telephone numbers and you have to constantly keep the system upgraded," Hutto said.

Hutto said School Messenger is a powerful system that the district is still exploring to find out every option and feature available. He said the message system can be used for more than just emergency situations.

"It's more than just emergency calls, we have done that and dismiss school early at least once and we let parents know," Hutto said. "But it also can be used to notify parents of students in certain schools about PTA meetings or staff development."

Jas N Smith, spokesman for Hattiesburg Public School District, said the district implemented a program called ConnectEd a couple years ago. Smith said the system is used daily to inform parents of student absentees.

"We have automatic messages set up to call parents when a student is absent to make them aware," Smith said. Smith said the district also uses the system for announcements of PTA meetings and for emergency situations.

Before the School Messenger purchase, Downs said reporting absenteeism was a tedious process.

"We have an attendance clerk at every school and they would call in absentees, but basically that has been about it," Downs said. "The situation is this, we think the time is right, and our school district is so large now, it's impossible to call every parent. Used to we could do it, but now we just can't do it."

Dabbs said parents need to know that if they see a missed call from the school district to listen to the message first before calling back. She also said this could be a solution to children not getting newsletters and other information to their parents.

"It's an excellent solution to the possibility of mail not getting in the right hands, and it's a better assurance to give parents."