

District Trains for Warning System

By George Diepenbrock
April 24, 2008

Students and staff members at a Lawrence elementary school were suffering from possible food poisoning.

Pesticides were sprayed onto the field at a junior high school on a Sunday night, which put into question whether school would be in session Monday.

Had either of these fictitious situations been real, Lawrence school administrators now know how to notify parents in an instant. Administrators trained Wednesday on the district's new notification system, SchoolMessenger, which can send out a recorded phone message to thousands of parents — either for an emergency or special school announcement.

"Parents are very busy, so it's just important to have that open communication," said Julie Abbott, vice president for sales and professional services for Reliance Communications, SchoolMessenger's parent company.

The Lawrence school board voted to purchase the \$33,000 system last May after countywide school bomb threats. When the district's new student information software came online, administrators moved forward with planning and training for SchoolMessenger.

A principal or administrator records a statement, then logs into a secure Web site, where the message is disseminated to specific phone numbers in the school's record system.

It can be used for emergencies. For example, the district sent a message to Woodlawn parents in November when a staff member found a threatening note in a desk after dismissal.

It can also be used for other announcements. Free State High School parents were notified Monday about the choice of a new principal.

One parent welcomed more communication.

"I think it would be nice because there are a lot of parents who don't come into the building often," said Jannette Kroeger, who has children at Woodlawn and Central Junior High schools.

But school officials also want to use the notification system judiciously.

"You don't want it to turn into spam, voice-mail spam. So we're going to be careful about that, but in emergencies it's critical to have," Superintendent Randy Weseman said.

In the next few weeks, school principals will start to test the system.