

Council Bluffs Community School District Adds Notification System

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When school starts in August, the Council Bluffs Community School District will be able to communicate almost instantly with parents, students and staff members.
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The district has spent the summer setting up the computerized Parent Notification System provided by SchoolMessenger, and school employees now are being trained on its use.

Right now, the district can alert the public to early dismissals, late starts or closings due to bad weather, heavy snow or ice by contacting radio and TV stations. School closing information also shows up on Iowa School Alerts, offered by the Iowa Department of Administrative Services, which will notify parents through e-mail if a school closes as well as through a service called cancellations.com that offers information on closings.

However, those systems are limited in their uses and can take time.

SchoolMessenger will allow the district to leave telephone and e-mail messages for parents by phone, contacting everyone in a matter of minutes. A school principal, a teacher or Superintendent Martha Bruckner can leave voice messages aimed at a group of students or at the entire district student population depending on the information to be sent. For instance, if a bus is late, a message can be sent to the parents of the students who ride that bus.

Bruckner said the system will allow the school to share "more regular and accurate messages with parents. It certainly won't replace our preferred method of talking with parents one-to-one, but it will help us be more efficient in sharing information with parents about safety issues or about specific concerns about their children."

A school principal or teacher could record or type a message to a group of students concerning an event, or Bruckner might record a general message when school starts on Aug. 14, district spokeswoman Diane Ostrowski said. SchoolMessenger builds on the current communication system.

"The new system can go beyond the standard emergency or weather-related notices. It's another way to communicate important information to parents in a timely manner using state-of-the-art technology," she said. When it's fully implemented, "We would use it for weather closings and emergency situations like lockdowns. Those are priorities. We need to be judicious in the messages we send, but it would also be used to notify parents about student absences. Right now, our phone calling system is not timely. It would be used to notify parents about their school lunch balances and for special events."

That's the beauty of the new system, Ostrowski said, since messages can be sent to one person, one classroom, a small group, one school "or the families of all 9,400 kids in the district."

SchoolMessenger will cost the district \$25,422, including a one-time configuration charge and a fee of \$2.50 per student. Funding will be provided by a Safe and Drug Free Schools grant, among other sources. The district checked with three firms that provide communications systems. The other two were Global Connect and Connect Ed, Ostrowski said.

"SchoolMessenger was the most efficient and affordable. Parents don't have to subscribe. They will simply start receiving messages. We do need some parents to give us their e-mail addresses, though. And parents can still get the information online or from local radio and TV," she said.

The Omaha Public School District also will install the SchoolMessenger system.

The Lewis Central Community School District has been looking at systems including SchoolMessenger, school improvement specialist Dave Black said, but is considering Global Connect.

"They are all similar systems. We're looking at three different vendors and we're narrowing the list, but we haven't made a decision. We could test a system in September," Black said.

St. Albert Catholic School officials do not plan any changes in notification procedures.