

On alert

Burk ISD first in North Texas to tap into electronic messaging

By Ann Work

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The school shootings at Virginia Tech and, more recently, Northern Illinois University, probably have you wondering: What if something similar happened at my child's school?

In the Burkburnett Independent School District, parents and employees won't have to wonder for long.

In an emergency, the district's seven schools will soon be ready to tell their parents and staff all about it.

The district recently signed on to a new alert notification system that puts all district staff and parents just a phone call — or a text message or an e-mail — away.

The service, called SchoolMessenger, will be installed by the end of March to provide Burkburnett's superintendent and principals the option and convenience of broadcasting any message to the school community or parts of the community within minutes, according to Nate Brogan, assistant vice president of SchoolMessenger sales.

"Most school districts purchase the system to have it just in case of emergency," Brogan said. "Then they find they can use it to improve parent involvement, which improves student achievement."

Messages can be sent to parents — in the media form each prefers — on anything from school picnics to a crisis such as a school shooting. It's available to the district every day, all day, Brogan said.

SchoolMessenger provides their services to 7,500 educational facilities, such as the Burkburnett ISD, nationwide. They currently serve 30 percent of the Texas school districts, but Burkburnett is the first North Texas school district to use it.

Burkburnett officials were looking for a way to reach parents, staff and the community in a timely fashion for any variety of circumstances, Brogan said.

This setup allows a school district to be proactive about crises, such as lockdowns or school closures, and to communicate positive things, such as school activities and reminders.

One unanticipated benefit to school districts with such a system is how handy it is for rumor control, Brogan said.

"There might be a food fight at a school, and before you know it, kids have text-messaged their parents that they've had a shooting. Parents panic, start calling the school over something as benign as a food fight. If something like that happens, a principal or superintendent can send a message home saying, 'Despite what you've heard, it was only a food fight,' and prevent panic. That example has actually happened."

The Burkburnett ISD will pay between \$2 to \$4 per student per year for the service, which includes unlimited

notifications throughout the course of the year through e-mail, telephone and text alerts. The district will also be able to conduct interactive surveys using the tool.

Each parent or staff member will choose how they want to be contacted and should expect a test of the system within the next two weeks, Brogan said.

In the Wichita Falls Independent School District, no such system exists.

WFISD Public Information Officer Renae Murphy said the district would use the news media to communicate any emergency alerts.

But that may soon change, she said. WFISD officials have been conducting an audit of the district's security program and will bring suggestions for improvement to board members later this spring.

An alert system "may be included in any budgetary requests this spring," Murphy said Friday.

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