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# Schools with Special Needs Students Connect with Parents in a Crisis

Since the 1999 school massacre that left 14 students and a teacher dead at Columbine High School in Colorado, followed by the September 11th attacks, and then the shootings at Virginia Tech, schools across America have been revising their emergency-notification and emergency-planning systems. In 2001, T. Gregory Bender, President and CEO of K12 Alerts, was inspired to develop his innovative emergency messaging software service after experiencing the virtual communications blackout caused by the September 11th attacks.

**Gregory Bender realized that** getting the word out quickly—in the case of emergencies concerning terrorist acts, severe weather, water main breaks, gas leaks or other crises—is a challenge for any school administration. Recent school-related emergencies and health issues have proven that there is a need to communicate quickly with parents to manage a crisis most efficiently.

Bender recalls 9/11 and the difficulty groups had communicating with individuals. “Telephone lines were down due to call overload. Verizon circuits that serviced the New York Tri-state area were blown-out,” he remembers. “But text-based messaging to cell phones and e-mail were still up. I analyzed how everyone communicated that day and wanted to create a better way for large groups of people to be contacted during a crisis.”

Long gone are the days of parent phone chains. Today, faster communications and instant alerts for any situation can empower school administrators to handle difficult events and put parent concerns at ease with better prepared school safety management.

Keeping students safe and families informed in an increasingly uncertain world is a top priority for public and private school administrators. K12 Alerts offers email, text-to-cell-phone, and telephone voice alert messaging solutions

for schools—empowering school administrators to communicate important alert messages to parents and staff in a matter of minutes. K12 Alerts is an emergency messaging platform that enables school districts to send real-time emergency messaging (e.g., weather alerts, school closings, bomb alerts, virus alerts, etc.) to parents and staff via e-mail and/or SMS text-based cell phone messages.

“The system allows schools to connect with every parent no matter what the situation is,” Mr. Bender said. “Schools can also present one unified message about any crisis situation to both parents and staff members instantly. The right message reaches everyone quickly and cuts down on the rumor mill.”

K12 Alerts not only serves typical children but also those with special needs. Currently,

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K12 Alerts is being used by the New York School for the Deaf as well as the Hallen School for children and young adults with disabilities. For these populations, the need for fast and effective communication is even more imperative than with typical children. Children with disabilities will not always know or be able to express important information, such as their home numbers, medical information, parent’s numbers, etc. Parents feel much more secure knowing that they can be reached if there is an emergency at the school. Imagine how this lessens stress for the parents of children who are not able to advocate for themselves?

New York School for the Deaf (NYSD) has students from over 70 school districts, as well as New York City, and is located in Westchester County in White Plains, NY.

“K12 Alerts has been a vital part of our School Emergency Plan. It has been a most valuable communication tool and has cut our contact time immensely. We look forward to expanding our use of this wonderful resource,” says Arlene Rice, Director of Communications at the New York School for the Deaf.

### **H1N1 influenza concerns...**

Since the H1N1 influenza outbreak began in the United States, all 50 US States have reported cases of novel H1N1 influenza with associated hospitalizations and some deaths. School officials on a case-by-case basis have closed their schools for a period of time to disinfect them and limit the spread of the H1N1 influenza, if detected in students or staff members. For these schools, having an effective means of reaching out to parents to keep them informed is essential in the operation of the schools and during any health related crisis.

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The Hallen School, which serves children and young adults with disabilities, has also incorporated K12 Alerts for their emergency and regular communication with parents. The Hallen School is a private, special education school located in New Rochelle, New York. Established in 1972, Hallen is one of the most comprehensive special education schools in the New York area. Today Hallen serves children, ages five through 21, who exhibit learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, emotional difficulties, autistic features, and mild health impairments.

Recently, The Hallen School had two doctor confirmed cases of the H1N1 Flu (Swine Flu), which required them to utilize K12 Alerts to send notices about steps that the school was taking in response to H1N1.

Dr. Priscilla Feir said, “In addition to sending an informational letter to parents regarding the health concern, we used the K-12 Alerts to provide timely updates. Both parents and staff expressed appreciation for the information regarding the status of the health concern, the decision to keep school open or closed, and the process for disinfecting. Trusting they would receive continued updates helped to ease everyone’s concerns.”

Mr. Bender adds, “Keeping parents informed and school officials empowered to communicate with parents in real-time is something that K12 Alerts prides itself on since its inception.”

The Internet in the past couple of years has become the main tool to let parents know when school is canceled and to distribute important notices quickly. Most schools post school closing and other information to their Web site and they rely on parents to visit their Web site to access that information. Schools struggle

with keeping email addresses and cell phone numbers current, this can be a full-time job for most administrators, outsourcing to K12 Alerts requires no internal investments in hardware or software.

A school administrator may call an 800 number to record a message and then send it to everyone, or to a targeted group like the fourth grade parents. Parents of students attending a fifth grade field trip can be contacted in the event of a school bus breakdown or delay, allowing parents time to make arrangements for picking up their child. Sporting event notifications are another way that schools communicate with parents; in the event of a rained out soccer game all the parents of the team may be contacted immediately.

### **K12 Alerts also provides Electronic Student Emergency Cards that parents may update and administrators can access in a few keystrokes, providing doctor, allergy, and other critical student information about each child.**

K12 Alerts notifies parents anywhere through multiple modes of communication, including email, text messaging to cell phones, and by telephone - depending on their location.

“What’s great about our triple-play alert system is that parents can be contacted anytime, anywhere, or while in transit via text and voice messaging about a weather delay or crisis concerning their children and we handle the data management,” said Bender.

Research findings show that 30% of parents and staff members change their emails and cell phone numbers annually in the United States, thus making it difficult for schools to stay current with critical student information. K12 Alerts also offers a proprietary Parent My Account® portal that is customized for each school where parents and staff members can maintain/update their

emergency phone numbers, email, and Text-to-Cell messaging numbers for emergency and routine messaging—like banks do for personal information. K12 Alerts also provides Electronic Student Emergency Cards that parents may update and administrators can access in a few keystrokes, providing doctor, allergy, and other critical student information about each child.

Parents log onto a Web site to register their emergency contact information. They can also specify their children’s grade levels and extracurricular activities—so in case of an emergency unique to one school or activity, appropriate parents would be notified. School administrators also use K12 alerts to send newsletters and other periodic updates to parents, staff, and the community. Today, K12 broadcasts an average of 700,000 messages in an hour.

Mr. Bender said his goal was not only to provide schools with an efficient, updated means of instant communication, but also help schools to save money and resources and help create “greener” school environments. The K12 Alerts program can lower school costs by decreasing paper communications and strengthening the home-to-school connection with email, voice, and text-to-cell parent communications.

“Schools nationwide are really embracing our mission, to increase communication and lower cost while decreasing their reliance on paper notices,” Bender said.

Regular use of the K12 Alerts system also helps keep information current to parents and staff members. School administrators view the K12 Alerts instant-notification system as a way to communicate with families sending positive messages, in addition to instant alert. Most Superintendents and school administrators use K12 Alerts for system-wide messages and daily calls to the parents of students who were absent or late to school. •

For more information, visit [www.k12alerts.com](http://www.k12alerts.com), call (914) 220-8326 or email them at [info@k12alerts.com](mailto:info@k12alerts.com).