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WESTCHESTER WEEKLY DESK

## SCHOOL SAFETY; For Instant Notice, and Worry, E-Mail Is Replacing Snail Mail

By **KATHLEEN MCGRORY** (NYT) 1102 words

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BENJI BAER, a marketing director in Stamford, Conn., was in a meeting one day recently when she received an upsetting e-mail message on her BlackBerry from the superintendent of her children's Westchester school district. It alerted parents to a recent attempted abduction in a neighboring town.

"I remember pausing and commenting to someone else that the e-mail was sort of creepy," said Ms. Baer, whose children are 3, 7 and 10. "But I'm glad that I had the information when I did. It enabled me to act instantly."

When the meeting ended, Ms. Baer said, she called home to inform the family baby sitter. And upon returning home that evening, she discussed safety issues with her children.

Ms. Baer is one of several thousand Westchester parents who now receive word of suspicious incidents electronically, rather than via a paper in their child's backpack at the end of the school day. Five such incidents in Westchester, Putnam and Rockland Counties since January have underscored the trend toward e-mailing and text messaging.

While police officials in the county do not believe the recent abduction attempts are related, the reports have

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conjured up memories from the fall of 2004, when a man and a woman were reported to be scouring Rye and Greenwich trying to lure children into a green van. No children were abducted in the case, and the drivers were never found, but the reports unnerved both communities.

How quickly should school officials notify parents when few facts are known, especially when they risk causing undue concern? Bruce T. Blythe, chief executive officer of Crisis Management International in Atlanta, called the choice a balancing act.

"In most cases," he said, "parents want to know all of the facts immediately, so that they can assess the situation and take parental control. But saying that there has been an attempted abduction when there really hasn't is like giving a false death notification. The schools need to send a quick message, but it also must be precise in its language and accurate."

For Dr. Frances Wills, superintendent of the Briarcliff Manor public schools, parents' wishes are an overriding concern. In today's digital society, she said, parents expect instant notification, particularly when it comes to suspicious activity. As in a growing number of Westchester school districts, almost all Briarcliff Manor parents have provided the school with their e-mail addresses.

"Before," Dr. Wills said, "we might have put a notice in a sealed envelope and sent it home with the children. Now parents can be in their offices in New York, and an e-mail will come directly into their place of work from the school."

Dr. David Fleishman, Chappaqua's superintendent -- who sent parents an e-mail alert on Feb. 3 when a stranger offered a student candy -- put it this way: "Letters home don't work. When we need to make sure that parents see this information, e-mail is the best way to do it."

Of the county's more than 40 school districts, a little more than half have the technology for delivering systemwide e-mail emergency alerts. Some can send text messages to parents' cellphones. The rest are at different stages of pursuing the technology.

Some, like White Plains and Yorktown, post emergency messages on the district Web site but do not send

individual e-mail messages. New Rochelle and Peekskill rely on an electronic service to place phone calls to parents.

In Eastchester, which plans to have its alert system operational within the next month, MaryEllen Byrne, a spokeswoman, said: "We're not ready to move entirely away from paper notices in backpacks. In any community, there are still people who are not yet computer literate. But e-mail and text messages are definitely the future."

The problem with the instant approach is that early information is not always accurate. This turned out to be true of an early e-mail alert sent out on Jan. 30 by Hackley, a private school in Tarrytown, after a student reported an attempted abduction. The public school district in nearby Hastings-on-Hudson, followed suit with its own alert.

Although the police discredited the child's story the next day, neither Hastings nor Hackley followed up with clarifying messages to parents. Hackley did hold a follow-up public meeting, according to its headmaster, Walter Johnson, but only 40 of the school's 700 families attended. Both he and Dr. John J. Russell, superintendent of the Hastings schools, said they ultimately relied upon the news media to disseminate the updated information to parents.

Dr. Russell, for his part, expressed wariness of instantaneous communication. He said e-mail put added pressure on him to notify parents immediately -- something he would rather not do without several sources of verification.

"Parents are not too forgiving," Dr. Russell said. "Yes, there is an increased capacity to communicate, but we need to make sure we are accurate and precise, especially when it comes to something that can cause significant anxiety."

Yet parents like Ms. Baer are willing to take that risk.

"Of course, more information is always better," Ms. Baer said. "But I have to err on the side of information. I would rather be a little paranoid than have something happen to my family."

In a Crisis, An Emergency Alert System

Gregory Bender of Mount Vernon got the inspiration for his company, K12 Alerts, in 2001 after living through the virtual communications blackout caused by the Sept. 11 attacks.

"The phones were down," remembered Mr. Bender, "but text-based messaging to cellphones and e-mail were still up. I took a good look at how everyone communicated that day. I knew there had to be a better way for parents and children to be in touch during a crisis."

Seven Westchester school districts are now using K12's emergency alert system, which enables administrators to communicate with thousands of parents via e-mail, text messages and telephones.

"The system allows schools to connect with every parent," Mr. Bender said. "Schools can also present a unified message about any crisis situation. One message reaches everyone."

At the outset, 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 that in case of an emergency unique to one school or activity, only the appropriate parents would be notified.

School administrators can also use K12 alerts to send newsletters and other periodic updates.

Today, K12 broadcasts an average of 500,000 messages an hour, Mr. Bender said. In addition to the Westchester schools, the White Plains-based K12 provides service to the Horace Mann School in Riverdale and the Fenn School, a private boys' school in Concord, Mass.

Photos: Dr. FRANCES WILLS; Dr. JOHN J. RUSSELL (Photo by Alan Zale for The New York Times); Dr. DAVID FLEISHMAN

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