

Cover Story

Schools sign up for high-tech alert system

REGION — Notices tucked into students' backpacks may be going the way of the metal lunchbox as schools go high-tech to communicate with parents.

A new system, run by the company K12 Alerts of White Plains, transmits real-time information — from weather delays to evacuations and other school emergencies — by text messages on cellphones, e-mail, or voice-mail to parents.

Three of the four Rivertowns districts have implemented the new messaging systems, replacing more traditional means of communication such as print mailings, phone chains, or mass e-mails, with Ardsley leading the way three years ago. Hastings will have the system in place Nov. 1, and Irvington will also likely launch K12 Alerts within the next few weeks.

The announcement came in the wake of two separate evacuations of the Irvington schools two weeks ago, though the district said plans to go forward with the notification system had been in the works for more than a year.

In the first incident, on Wednesday, Oct. 4, a note of a threatening nature left by a student in one of the Irvington Middle School's bathrooms was found at about 2:10 p.m., less than an hour before most classes finished for the day, according to Schools Superintendent Kathleen Matusiak. Both the middle and high schools, which are on the same campus, were evacuated as police were called to investigate, but Matusiak said it was difficult to alert parents in time to make pickup arrangements because it was so close to the end of the school day. "It was a real dilemma," Matusiak said. "Even if you don't think [the threat] is for real, you can't take a chance," Matusiak said.

Matusiak said she is confident the new K12 Alerts system will alleviate the confusion that was caused by early pickups of students that week.

The system will cost the district about \$10,000 annually. Fees are based on student population and may decrease after the first year of use.

Parents sign up voluntarily online, registering their contact information and preferred method(s) of communication.

By transmitting notices from a main server, K12 Alerts can communicate with parents in seconds via automated text or e-mail messages as well as by cellphone or landline, leaving a voicemail if no one answers.

"Because we communicate in three different ways, the busy working parent is guaranteed to get the message," said Gregory Bender, president and CEO of K12 Alerts.

That message may be weather-related delays or closings, power outages, health information, or even regular district newsletters. But with recent high-profile incidents across the country making school safety a growing issue of concern, upgrading their communication system maybe of the greatest use to districts in crisis situations.

"It helps to keep down the rumor mill and allows districts to inform parents directly and instantly with the message they would like to send," Bender said.

The company began in 2001, first targeting the corporate market. Three years ago, it expanded its service to schools under the "K12 Alerts" banner. Other Westchester districts that have signed on for the service include Tarrytown, Eastchester, and Chappaqua. "It's been very valuable," said Richard Maurer, Ardsley schools superintendent. "When they get the messages, parents e-mail me and say, 'Wow, it's great communication.'"

The district implemented the messaging system, which it calls Ardsley Blast, almost four years ago, and 90 percent of parents have signed up for it. Hastings Schools Superintendent Bob Shaps said he believes that the notification system will go a long way toward emergency preparedness.

"Knowing that we've expanded the resources available to get a hold of parents is critical," Shaps said.

David Hayes, Hastings' district public information officer, said that the system would have come in handy during the anthrax scare caused last spring after a dancer who had visited the elementary school was diagnosed with the disease.

According to Schools Superintendent Debra Kaplan, Dobbs Ferry is in negotiations with K12 Alerts to implement the system in the district, which currently uses mass e-mails to communicate with parents.

~~~~~  
**K12 Alerts®**  
445 Hamilton Avenue  
11th Floor  
White Plains, New York 10601  
914.220.8326  
safety@k12alerts.com  
www.k12alerts.com