

When Danger Strikes

Emergency alert systems are critical to notify parents, but texting sometimes is the best way to communicate during a crisis situation

More than two-thirds of campus environments—including K-12 schools, higher education, and hospital campuses—will install or upgrade emergency alert systems during the academic year, according to a *Campus Safety Magazine* (www.campussafety-magazine.com) survey.

The 57-page study also found that despite significantly heightened con-

cern about campus safety, actual sign-ups for one of the most popular alert mediums—emergency text alert systems—are dangerously low.

Even so, in a nod to the widespread use of mobile phones and other PDAs by students, a majority of campuses, 57 percent, still maintain that text messaging is their notification method of choice, and that they'll be installing or upgrading those kinds of systems in 2008-2009.

Meanwhile, another 39 percent plan to upgrade or install new loudspeakers. And 27 percent will be installing digital signs to warn students of imminent danger.

Campuses who have gotten students to sign up for text messaging alerts say appeals via e-mail work best. About 70 percent of campuses promote their systems this way. Others say they're able to get students to sign on during new student orientations and on school websites.

Staff member participation also is solicited with some luck on school websites and during new hire orientations.

"With three quarters of the population carrying mobile phones, it makes sense to consider emergency broadcast text messaging solutions," says Jill Aldort, a senior analyst with the Yankee Group (www.yankeegroup.com).

"In the event of an emergency or an urgent situation, organizations need to be able to convey critical information to members of their communities in a time-sensitive manner."

Texting is the best

Schools that have already budgeted for a new text alert system may want to check out MessageOne (www.messagesageone.com/crisis-communications), Roam Secure (www.roamsecure.net), and MobileSphere (www.mobilesphere.com).

"Text messaging has consistently proven to be the most effective means of reaching people during times of crisis," says Gavin Macomber, MobileSphere's executive vice president of marketing.

Other schools who would like new systems but don't have the money may want to consider free text alert systems that are supported by advertising, like the one offered by Mobile Campus (www.mobilecampus.com).

The system sends text alerts to students, staff, and others during any emergency and can also be used to send school news. Schools get the service free by getting every user to agree to receive two text ads on their cellphones each day.

Of course, even with all the new technology, there have been some snafus. *Campus Safety Magazine* surveyed one user of an auto-phone-calling service, who said the system got bogged down when hordes of recorded emergency calls went unanswered and the system redialed the unanswered calls, insistent on a pick-up.

Another user says the existence of numerous alert systems on campus made it difficult to get an emergency



message alert out easily and simply.

And still other users say there was no clear guideline as to who should actually activate an emergency alert protocol or how to deal with parents who charged a campus that was in the midst of an emergency.

Security detail

The Department of Homeland Security has been doing its part to help schools plan for a full spectrum of emergencies by pulling together a number of security resources on the Web. Those include:

- The Safe School Initiative is a joint study by the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education that offers insights into the thinking and behavior of students who commit acts of targeted violence. One of the initiative's key recommendations is for schools to form a multidisciplinary threat assessment team to identify, evaluate, and manage students who may pose a threat.

An interactive CD-ROM, titled "A Safe School and Threat Assessment Experience: Scenarios Exploring the Findings of the Safe School Initiative," complements the published documents of the Safe School Initiative. The CD is available to law enforcement and school safety personnel, and can be ordered at www.edpubs.org.

- More preparedness how-tos are available at the Emergency Response and Crisis Management Technical Assistance Center (<http://rems.ed.gov/>). Resources include guidance documents, Web-based training sessions, updated information on the Department of Education's ERCM discretionary grant program, and topic-specific newsletters.

- Authored by first responders, emergency planners, and similar Homeland Security partners, Lessons Learned Information Sharing is a collection of best practices (www.llis.gov) and an invaluable resource on what to do and what not to do during an emergency.

- The Federal Emergency Manage-

ment Agency provides online instruction on how to develop an emergency management plans for all hazards (<http://training.fema.gov/emiweb>). These "train-the-trainer" courses link school personnel with first responders, law enforcement, public health officials, and others to discuss different needs and decisions that may arise during an emergency. Institutions can also request similar, in-person training from FEMA.

- The Department of Homeland Security encourages institutions to partner with local Citizen Corps Councils (www.citizencorps.gov), a nationwide network of volunteers who specialize in emergency preparedness. The councils operate at the community level, bringing public and private sectors together with local government, emergency managers, voluntary organizations, and first responders to coordinate disaster preparedness planning and response efforts in our communities.

- The Integrative Center for Homeland Security at Texas A&M (<http://homelandsecurity.tamu.edu/safe-schools>) offers a storehouse of sample emergency plans, links to responses to previous emergencies, as well as related websites and data.

- The Department of Homeland Security offers several emergency preparedness grant programs (www.grants.gov) to state and local governments, which decide if the DHS funding may be applied to educational facilities. A complete DHS list of emergency preparedness resources is available at www.dhs.gov/schoolpreparedness.

Included is a link to a 90-minute webcast recording of a "School Preparedness Virtual Town Hall," hosted by the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Education. Information on related grant programs also is included in the webcast. ■

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