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**Best Practice:  
Get Faster Parent Calling With Telephone Broadcast Messaging  
By Steve Unger**

Every school has undoubtedly had the need - or thought about it - to contact large groups of parents at the same time, often as quickly as possible. It may just be a late change in a meeting or event schedule, but it could involve a more urgent notification, such as an unplanned dismissal due to weather, power outage, or school evacuation.

Obviously, it's difficult or impossible for staff members to call every student's parents in a short time. Some schools create family-driven phone chains or phone trees to help reach other parents, but those processes can fail and take time, given the likelihood of missed connections, breakdowns in the chain, or even erroneous information being passed along. (Remember the game "Playing telephone"?) To reach large groups of parents, e-mail can be a viable option if you're sending out news that's not time-sensitive. However, any notices requiring immediate attention will only work if the recipients access their computers' mailboxes right away.

But now there's a new and better solution, one that combines the best elements of telephones and the Internet. Known as "Telephone Broadcast Messaging," this innovative process optimizes those technologies to provide a fast, effective, accurate communication service for schools.

Recently, a Montessori school in the path of Hurricane Isabel, used telephone broadcast messaging to great affect. With the help of GroupCast, a telecommunications service company based in St. Louis, MO, Mrs. Robyn Mancini-Stearne, head of school for Gladwyne Montessori, was able to record a school cancellation message that was electronically sent to the home of every parent whose child/children attend Gladwyne Montessori.

"We were really faced with a challenge," Mancini-Stearne said. "We needed to communicate our dismissal plans to parents and advise them about our post storm plans. Before we enrolled with the system, we would spend countless hours achieving what GroupCast can do in 5 minutes. During the hurricane we needed to cancel school and we were able to let the parent body know of the closing within minutes."

In simple terms, telephone broadcast messaging automates your school's dialing process and simultaneously sends your newly recorded information directly to a series of pre-selected phone numbers - all on a moment's notice. That removes the burden of any actual calling from the school facility, and assures you of having your vital messages sent out immediately and correctly.

"School administrators have no problems calling a few parents individually, but when the entire parent population needs to be contacted, that's when they have major problems," says Paul Langhorst, co-founder of GroupCast Messaging Service, a provider of telephone broadcast messaging. "This new technology fills a

communication void for schools by enabling them to reach all of the parents easily, and do it fast."

With a telephone broadcast messaging system, a school maintains their database of parents' and caregivers' home, work or cell phone numbers in a secure, web-based directory. When needed, the school superintendent or principal simply calls a toll-free number to get into the system, and then records the message they wish to deliver. They can even access the program remotely from any touch-tone phone. Then once activated, the system delivers the broadcast message to every designated recipient's phone number, using that school administrator's own recording, not an automated computer voice.

"Since activating our service, we have a much greater degree of control and confidence when faced with a situation requiring parent notification," said Tina Reichardt, principal of St. Clement School in Des Peres, MO. "It's just wonderful knowing I can reach out to 250 parents with just a moments notice. We've used our service from everything from snow day alerts to meeting notices with great results. In the past we scrambled to make parent calls, and now we just make one!"

Schools are also finding that telephone broadcast messaging helps them comply with the Department of Homeland Security Emergency Guidelines, which were announced earlier this year. The DHS recommends that schools have a plan for communicating information to parents and for quelling rumors and to make sure that every student has primary and secondary contact person and to make contact information immediately available. A telephone broadcast service puts the student contact information at the finger tips of school administrators and gives them access to this information from any touchtone phone or web site.

Telephone broadcast messaging is extremely economical too. The cost usually works out to just pennies per call, but there are often other one-time charges or fees to consider. A standard industry practice is to collect prepayment for a block of calls based on a school's enrollment or estimated usage – much the same as found with prepaid long distance calling cards. Most plans are flexible and allow for movement from one plan the next or purchasing more calls when needed.

"This kind of system gives a school hundreds or thousands of available phone lines, enabling them to call hundreds or thousands of parents in just minutes," explains Gordon Grohman of TMX Communication Services, a marketer of telephone broadcast messaging. "There's never been anything like this before ...and probably never has there been a greater need for it.

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