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Whittier Union HSD Links Parents, Teachers

by Linda L. Briggs

Introducing a new technology tool often has unexpected results. At Whittier Union High School District south of Los Angeles, teachers and parents are having more face to face interactions after the district introduced an automated system for contacting parents about student behavior.

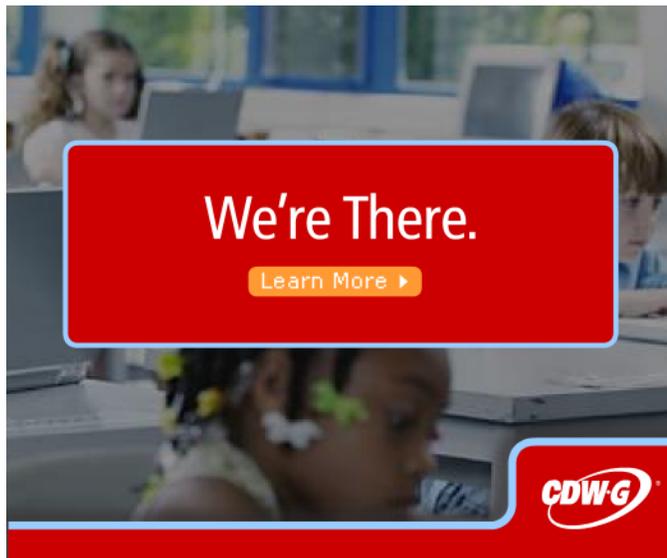
"Teachers are saying that they have more phone and face to face contact with parents after notifying them using TeleParent," according to Carlye Marousek Olsen, director of accountability, staff development, and ed tech at Whittier Union High School District in Whittier, CA. TeleParent is an automated communication system that can be set to call or e-mail parents individually with any one of hundreds of messages, including positive ones about their child's behavior. After they receive calls from the automated system, Olsen said, parents seem to be more comfortable contacting teachers.

Schools in the district have also reported better classroom behavior overall and an increase in the amount of homework being completed. Whittier Union is a suburban district located about 10 miles southeast of the heart of Los Angeles; it serves more than 13,500 students at seven senior high schools. More than 40 percent of students receive free and reduced-fee lunches.

The system, which is accessed by teachers through the Internet, can either send e-mails or make phone calls; teachers log on to the TeleParent site and click specific boxes to choose what messages to send to which parents.

Although the district also uses an automated attendance calling system to alert parents when students are absent, Whittier is using TeleParent exclusively for messages from teachers to parents. Many of the messages are simple reminders: "Your child has a project due Friday," or, "Your child has a test this Thursday." Messages can also be positive, which can be a nice surprise for parents and students alike. "One parent called in tears thanking the teacher for sending a positive comment about their child--something they had not received since elementary school," Olsen said.

Since launching the product district-wide last fall, Whittier has also broadcast several district-wide and school-wide messages. The system can be set to send out a message immediately or at a set time. In one instance, students in a specific area were being accosted for their Apple iPods. The district sent a phone message to alert parents to the issue; perhaps coincidentally, suspects were arrested shortly thereafter.



Olsen said TeleParent's ease of use made it stand out when she compared it to comparable K-12 communication systems. "There were a couple of similar products, but they were much more complicated to use, and we felt teachers weren't going to use them."

Because the Whittier Union district is more than 80 percent Hispanic, an important TeleParent feature is the fact that it includes over 700 standard pre-recorded messages, with native-speaker translations into 22 languages, all as part of the product. Teachers can also record their own individual messages, if desired.

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Another plus: TeleParent uses its own phone lines, not the district's, Olsen said, "so the message goes out a lot quicker." Whittier's separate automated attendance system, which phones parents when a student is absent, requires four to six dedicated lines, depending on the size of the high school, and can take hours of calling. "It takes a lot [less time] to get a message out when you're using hundreds of different lines," as TeleParent does, Olsen said.

Purchase of TeleParent was triggered by a survey during the 2005-2006 school year in which parents asked for more communication between school and home, especially about their child's day to day academic activities, overall progress, and behavior in class. Administrators and teachers wanted more interaction with parents as well.

Rolling out the new product at the beginning of the school year was fairly simple. The district piloted TeleParent at one high school during the summer, when attendance is critical because one semester is condensed into six weeks of summer school. At the district's request, TeleParent customized its message bank so that parents could be notified immediately of a student absence. Based on that pilot, Whittier rolled out the system district-wide at the beginning of the school year.

The system's cost is about four dollars per student; funding for the first year has come from a block grant. Feedback from parents and teachers has been so positive, Olsen said, that the district plans to continue with the system. "At four dollars a student, it's really [equal to] the cost of a few mailings," Olsen said. Written failure notices still must be sent, by law, "but [TeleParent] can prevent things from getting to that point."

Use of TeleParent is voluntary, but some 85 percent of teachers in the Whittier district have used it at some point during the school year. Based on positive comments from parents and teachers, and high product use, Olsen said the district plans to continue to pay for the product. "We re-prioritized some of our funding and will still be paying for all of it at the district [level]."

In fact, reception has been so positive, Olsen said, that teachers have called and thanked her for the new system--a rare occurrence indeed when a new technology is introduced.

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Proposals for articles and tips for news stories, as well as questions and comments about this publication, should be submitted to David Nagel, executive editor, at dnagel@1105media.com.



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