

When a prison break threatened nearby schools, Castaic Union School District used the Blackboard Connect service to reach out to thousands of parents during the course of the incident. According to district superintendent, James M. Gibson, “Blackboard Connect allows us to share important information with parents in a timely manner. In an urgent situation, parents always know what we’re doing, where we are, how the day is going, and when the event concludes.”

## **CHALLENGE:** Local Prison Breaks Require Frequent District Lockdowns

Castaic Union School District (CUSD) is located in northern Los Angeles County, 40 miles from downtown Los Angeles. The district serves 3,400 students in grades K-8 and operates four schools, including one middle and three elementary facilities. The surrounding area is suburban and rural and the community is primarily middle class. Approximately ten percent of students are English learners.

While known for its recreational opportunities due to the proximity of two lakes—Castaic Lake and Pyramid Lake—the area is also home to the North County Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison with capacity for 3,800 inmates. The facility is located two miles from Live Oak Elementary and five miles from the remaining schools. In the early morning hours of April 28, 2010, two inmates escaped from the prison. “We’re accustomed to one or two breaks a year. This year we’ve had three,” said Gibson. “Each time, it’s important for us to be able to quickly get messages out to the parent community.”

## **SOLUTION:** Blackboard Connect

The district had implemented the Blackboard Connect service to facilitate both general outreach and urgent communication. “Although we use it for daily attendance messaging, we’re very aware of how important it is to have a mass notification system in a crisis,” said Gibson. “We’re not only close to the correctional facility, but we’re surrounded by the Angeles National Forest. Fires are always a threat. Incidents involving either of these require fast calls to parents.”

When district administrators heard of the prison break, communicating with the parent community became first priority. At 8:45 am, Gibson used the Blackboard Connect service to contact more than 2,500 households. The message’s purpose was twofold: inform and provide reassurance.

### Quick Facts

- ) Population: 3,400 students
- ) Grades served: K-8
- ) Number of schools: 4
- ) Located in northern Los Angeles County, CA
- ) Used Blackboard Connect to reassure parents during school lockdown after prison break



“We wanted parents to know that in an emergency their children are safer here than really anywhere else,” said Gibson. Further complicating matters was the fact that the prison break coincided with the district’s administration of state assessments. End-of-year testing is critical for more than just measuring progress: the assessments tie into the district’s ability to meet the educational needs of students in the coming years. “The break had the potential to affect our assessment of student achievement, which could be detrimental to both students and the district at large,” said Gibson. “We needed to let parents to know that it was critical that each and every child attend class that day.”

### **RESULT: Schools Kept Safe, Assessment Tests Proceed Uninterrupted**

The escapees were found and detained at 5 pm, and the incident concluded without injury or violence. The Blackboard Connect service allowed the district to stay in contact with parents throughout the day to provide both reassurance and to keep parents aware of schedule and release changes. In total, the district sent four messages, including an all-clear notification sent at 7 pm. “Blackboard Connect allows us to share important information with parents in a timely manner. In an urgent situation, parents always know what we’re doing, where we are, how the day is going, and when the event concludes,” said Gibson. “It’s also important for us to be able to get our messages out without the filter of the media. The news media is usually interested in sensationalizing a story. We just want to get out what actually happened that day and be perceived as a source of reliable, factual information.”

Being able to provide rapid, ongoing reassurance to parents via the service also proved invaluable: parents were comfortable leaving their children in school, even as the incident continued to unfold. The district was able to continue with state assessments, and student achievement was unaffected in terms of both testing and everyday learning. “Kids were very quiet, and testing went off without a hitch,” said Gibson. “Since this was the third prison break this year and previous incidents had resolved without

affecting the schools, the kids knew we would care for them and keep them safe.”

The district used the service’s targeting capabilities to contact different parent audiences regarding end-of-the-day procedures. “Each school had a different release procedure in place. Blackboard Connect allowed us to do some sophisticated targeting to ensure parents had the correct information about picking up their children,” said Gibson. The district also relies on the service’s language preference feature to deliver messages in Spanish. “We like it because we’re able to send messages in Spanish out to a specific population. Everybody gets the English message, but our Spanish message goes out to families who have indicated they’re a Spanish speaking home.”

The district continues to use the Blackboard Connect service for general outreach communication and relies on the service’s survey capabilities to foster an environment of partnership with parents. Surveys are used to determine parent interest and garner feedback on a variety of issues, including a reinstatement of summer school and possible calendar changes. “I love the survey capabilities of the service,” said Gibson. “Recently, we decided to change our calendar so that it would start with the high school calendar. We surveyed all our parents to determine if they’d rather have two weeks at spring break or get out a week early. The survey gave us overwhelming information that they wanted to be done early.”

Consistent, judicious use of the service for both urgent and day-to-day general outreach has resulted in positive feedback from both parents and the community at large, and Gibson regularly recommends the Blackboard Connect service to other districts. “I’m a happy customer. Blackboard Connect performs wonderfully. The immediacy of response is great, and I know the messages get out there. The community really appreciates knowing what’s going on and they tell us that. The goodwill that you get from that is tremendous.”

This story originally appeared in the National School Public Relations Association newsletter, November 2010.