

Blackboard Connect unites a community during crisis

When rapidly rising flood waters threatened the campuses of Fargo Public Schools, the district used the Blackboard Connect service to communicate school closures and to recruit thousands of volunteers to aid in the sandbagging effort. Over a period of 22 days, more than 152,000 messages were sent, which resulted in thousands of additional student and parent volunteers joining together to help protect the community. The ability to send thousands of messages from a variety of locations during an emergency led Fargo Public Schools to call Blackboard Connect “our primary communication tool.”

Problem: The district needed to alert the community and quickly recruit volunteers.

A district located in the Fargo/Moorhead metropolitan area, Fargo Public Schools (FPS) serves 11,400 students and employs over 1,000 people. The largest district of three in the metro area, the district oversees more than 22 instructional buildings, including two high schools, three middle schools, and fifteen elementary schools.

While Fargo’s fabled “500-year flood” was thought to have occurred over a decade earlier in 1997, the combination of heavy winter snows, spring rain, and rapid thawing in early 2009 soon had officials realizing a second catastrophic flood was imminent. Many of the district’s buildings are

proximal to the Red River; Fargo’s flat topography means that even a minimal rise in water levels has the potential to cause substantial damage to nearby structures. Sandbagging efforts began immediately, but as water levels rose, it became evident that, in order to protect district facilities, sandbag production would have to increase dramatically. Additional volunteers were needed by the next morning at the very latest. The district surmised that high school students and their parents might agree to help if they could be reached on a one-on-one basis and given clear instructions for volunteering.



Quick Facts

- 11,400 students and 25 instructional buildings
- Largest district in metro area
- Has used Blackboard Connect for 3 years
- Sent out 152,000 flood-related messages in 22 days
- 2,979 phone messages yielded 2,200 high school volunteers
- One community-wide message yielded 6,000 volunteers

Solution: The district used notification service to recruit volunteers

While the district had used the Blackboard Connect service for day-to-day messaging, they had not yet employed the service in an emergency or crisis situation. Administrators knew that relying on a notification service to deliver event reminders and school lunch menus was very different from trusting that same service to send out thousands of messages in a crisis. Relying solely on the media was not an option.

On March 19, administrators sent out 2,979 phone messages via Blackboard Connect to North High School and South High School students and parents. The message asked for help with sandbagging and included specific information and instructions regarding buses, food, required permission slips, and meet-up locations. Delivery success rates of 93% and 84%, respectively, demonstrated that the majority of families had received the message.

Result: Thousands of community members volunteered for duty

The next day, it was clear that messaging had been highly successful. Results were significant: more than 2,200 students and parents heeded the call for volunteers. Over the next few days, as flood waters continued to rise, the district resumed volunteer recruitment via the Blackboard Connect service. When sandbag production became a 24/7 enterprise, the district also used the service to notify parents and students of school cancellations.

By March 26, despite the production of an incredible 500,000 sandbags per day, it was evident that even more help was needed. The district used the Blackboard Connect service to facilitate engagement from the city at large, sending the message district-wide to 21,116 residents. An estimated 6,000 volunteers showed up to help as a direct result of the call.

By the time the river began to recede, over 3.5 million sandbags had been produced and placed, and the district had sent out more than 150,000 flood-related messages to students, parents, and community members. For the district, the ability to communicate directly with students and parents proved instrumental in protecting the community from rapidly rising flood waters. "At its highest point the river level was six inches below the highest sandbag," said Lowell Wolff, Assistant to the Superintendent. "If sandbag protection had failed, we would have lost three schools. With Blackboard Connect we were able to carefully construct all of our messages. In recruiting volunteers, details were critical. Students and parents had to know where to go, what to bring, as well as what would be provided by the district."

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Lowell Wolff, Assistant to the Superintendent for Communication and Planning, Fargo Public Schools

The ability to access the service from anywhere was also crucial. As administrators were primarily offsite during the flooding, either meeting with city officials or assisting with sandbagging, message creation and dissemination had to be done "on the fly" from a variety of locations.

Once the immediate danger of flooding was past, the district also used Blackboard Connect to communicate with faculty and staff regarding administrative items such as compensation. With the cancellation of school, hourly employees were anxious about eight days of lost wages. The district sent a message directing hourly employees to the employee web portal for more information about wage decisions. According to Wolff, during a time of great stress and uncertainty, the service "allowed us to reach out to a particular group and deliver a personalized message."

"Blackboard Connect is our primary communication tool. During the flood, it allowed us to communicate very quickly and specifically with both large and small groups of people in a very specific manner, which is invaluable in any crisis situation," said Wolff. "Without it, we could not have reliably contacted as many people as we did in such a short time frame. If there was ever any question in the community that this tool was worth its money, this flood situation certainly removed that doubt."