

School District Stays Connected During Hurricane Katrina

When Hurricane Katrina threatened the St. Charles Parish Public School District in late August 2005, the district relied on Blackboard Connect to quickly communicate school closures and safety measures with thousands of parents and community members. As communications broke down region-wide, the district became one of the few available sources of factual information and a “catalyst for normalcy,” not just for the district, but for the city at large. According to the district’s director of public information, Rochelle Cancienne-Touchard, “Blackboard Connect allowed us to deliver clear, concise, 24/7 communication in a time when outreach was critical.”

CHALLENGE: Storm-based Communications

The St. Charles Parish Public School District is located in rural Louisiana, twenty miles upriver from New Orleans. With a budget of \$113 million, the district manages seventeen schools and serves over 10,000 students. The parish itself is economically varied: while the region is home to several Fortune 500 companies, forty-five percent of the district’s student are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Given the region’s proximity to the coast, the district is often threatened by tropical storms and hurricanes.

Since tropical storms can metamorphose into hurricanes overnight, the district’s ability to quickly and efficiently reach thousands of parents – from any location – is critical. And news of school closures and safety and evacuation information is important to more than just parents – with over 1,700 faculty and staff members, the district is the largest employer in the parish. Communication responsibilities extend, too, to the community at large, as the district is involved with the local Emergency Operations Center (EOC). In the past, the district had relied on local media to communicate with stakeholders during an emergency – with mixed results. During a hurricane, communications infrastructures can be irreparably damaged, and evacuees often travel hundreds of miles away from the area, out of range of local media messaging.



QUICK FACTS

-) Located 20 miles from New Orleans
-) Manages 17 schools and serves over 10,000 students
-) 1,700 faculty and staff members
-) Sent 279,863 calls over 13 days during Hurricane Katrina



SOLUTION: Blackboard Connect

The district's director of public information, Rochelle Cancienne-Touchard, realized the ability to connect with thousands of parents in minutes — from any location — was critical to the district's emergency communication strategy. She had become familiar with the Blackboard Connect service during the 2004 NSPRA seminar and knew that a neighboring district in Lafayette was already using the system successfully. "Our ability to communicate was a prime concern for our executive staff, and my team recommended Blackboard Connect to the superintendent," Cancienne-Touchard said. "During an evacuation, people don't just go fifty miles away. They're often in different states. It's impossible to get a media message that distance consistently."

The district selected the Blackboard Connect service in April 2005 and in early August began the task of entering names, phone numbers, and email addresses of the district's parents and community members. Data entry was completed just in time: by late August, Hurricane Katrina was headed directly for New Orleans — and St. Charles Parish.

RESULT: 279,000 Calls in 13 Days

Mandatory evacuations were called on Saturday, August 27. That same morning, the district sent a message to 30,000 phone numbers indicating that schools would be closed. Over the next 13 days, the district sent an additional 279,863 calls; message content ranged from school closure updates to evacuation information to reassurance regarding staff paychecks. By Monday, August 29, the Parish was without power, sewer services, and water. Message delivery, however, continued; when the district's on-site web server went down, Cancienne-Touchard contacted Blackboard Connect, often in the wee hours of the morning, and dictated messages directly to the service's customer care team. "We never experienced any kind of downtime with Blackboard Connect. We did have downtime with other vendors, but Blackboard Connect's security and redundancy measures ensured

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Rochelle Cancienne-Touchard
Director of Public Information
St. Charles Parish Public School District, LA

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The ability to communicate before, during, and after one of the most devastating hurricanes in history affected more than parents, students, and staff. As local infrastructures failed, the district became the sole governmental source of information in the area. "Corporate leaders indicated our communication helped them encourage workers to return," Cancienne-Touchard stated, and the district's consistent messaging led to the district being viewed city-wide as a "catalyst for normalcy."

Over a 13-day period, the district successfully completed more than 279,000 calls to 21,000 residents. "Blackboard Connect allowed us to deliver clear, concise, 24/7 communication in a time when outreach was critical," Cancienne-Touchard stated. "I truly believe in Blackboard Connect because I lived through Hurricane Katrina using Blackboard Connect. And the services it provided for us to get our messages out provided comfort to all our stakeholders. I couldn't put a price on that."