

Targeted Communications Lead to Greater Parent Involvement

Getting parents involved as partners in their child’s education is a daunting task for many school districts. At Marion County Public Schools, the AlertNow service improves communication between administrators and parents, providing families with targeted, relevant information. District leader Kevin Christian notes: “Each day we discover more ways to leverage AlertNow to send meaningful and timely communications to our parents. It’s an essential tool for Marion County Public Schools.”

CHALLENGE: Boost Parental Involvement in Rural District

Marion County Public Schools (MCPS) is a K-12 school district in north-central Florida. Based in Ocala, MCPS consists of 50 schools, serving over 42,000 students. With an area of over 1650 square miles, Marion County is larger than the state of Rhode Island. Marion County district leaders needed to communicate with a widely scattered population and target specifically defined groups with relevant information.

Marion County administrators recognized that greater parental involvement is directly related to improved student performance. However, there were several obstacles to overcome, beyond the district’s size and dispersed population. As a largely-rural district with significant funding challenges, MCPS needed a cost-effective solution as well. Traditional communication tools, such as newsletters and flyers, lose effectiveness as students move on to higher grade levels, and cannot efficiently deliver targeted messages.

SOLUTION: Targeted Outreach Using AlertNow

Since February 2006, MCPS has used the AlertNow service to communicate quickly with families. According to Kevin Christian, Marion County’s Public Relations and Communication Officer, “We’re all doing more with less these days. Any avenue that we can use to increase communication and improve the payoff without increasing the cost is obviously one we will use.”

Quick Facts

- › *More than 42,000 students*
- › *Marion County Public School system contains 29 elementary schools, 8 middle schools, 8 high schools, 2 combination schools, one ESE school and one adult education center*
- › *Located in central Florida, 30 miles south of Gainesville*



Children encounter academic setbacks when they do not attend school regularly. "In our district, Oakcrest Elementary pioneered the idea of using AlertNow to track and improve attendance," said Christian. "Other schools have done likewise over time. These calls are targeted not to students, but to their parents. Homes of students with attendance concerns are called shortly after 6:00 AM. Sometimes the calls sound bright, cheerful, and happy, and other times, our callers will sing, 'Good Morning! Good Morning! Good Morning!', or whatever the song might be that day." The calls help ensure that parents deliver their children to school on time and ready to learn.

RESULTS: Improved Attendance, and Increase Communications with Parents

The results have been dramatic. "We have seen remarkable, measureable improvements in attendance at these schools," said Christian. "At Oakcrest Elementary, for example, the improvements easily exceeded 20 percent for the school as a whole. For the targeted students, attendance consistently improved by over 50 percent, and in some cases, by as much as 75 percent. In addition, the district makes an attendance call each evening to homes when a student is absent for at least a portion of the school day."

Informing families about upcoming events also engages parents. A recent initiative targeted incoming 6th through 11th graders for summer enrichment classes. "We're putting on the biggest summer school program we've had in several years," said Christian. "The idea was to share that information with parents of middle and high school students. We described the program in an AlertNow message and directed them to visit our web site for registration details and more information. We have received a lot of positive feedback, along with strong registration numbers."

"Another example of targeting took place recently at one of our high schools," said Christian. "The school sent a message to families of all of the 8th graders in their feeder middle schools with information about their International Baccalaureate program. With this type of information, parents

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can explore options and programs that will best serve their students as they enter high school."

Students and families for whom English is a second language appreciate receiving accurate and easy to understand information in their native language. AlertNow offers the ability to target families by their primary language, which MCPS uses to engage Spanish speaking parents. "Any time we send out a message at the district level, we do our best to make sure the Spanish version is available and delivered at the same time as the English version," said Christian. "We can identify households as English or Spanish using our student information system. AlertNow uses that data to create calling groups which we use to send out the different messages. Some of our individual schools with high percentages of Spanish-speaking students will also send messages in Spanish to those households."

"We have also launched a parent involvement campaign called Be There," said Christian. "It is a complete program which includes promotional materials, professionally designed graphics, marketing copy, and videos that are made available to schools at no charge. We have incorporated Be There into every AlertNow message by adding the tagline, '... and parents, remember, Be There for your child every day.' With the Be There program, and our AlertNow messages, parents have become increasingly aware that we need their involvement in our schools."

