

Device helps teachers translate

Fresno Unified tests system for parents who don't speak English.

By Christina Vance / The Fresno Bee

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Teacher Janene Marsella speaks English, and she needs to talk to people who don't.

The Cooper Middle School teacher had to get creative to communicate with the non-English-speaking parents of her students. She sometimes asked bilingual school employees to pass along messages.

But recently, Marsella communicated in multiple languages with a few clicks of a computer mouse.

Ten Fresno Unified schools are testing a multilingual automated calling system named TeleParent.

The system calls parents with pre-translated messages on student behavior, upcoming school activities and emergency situations.

TeleParent can deliver messages in Spanish and Hmong, and the company has agreed to develop messages to communicate with Khmer and Lao parents, district spokeswoman Erin Kennedy said.

It only takes about three weeks to add a language to the system. Kennedy said that's a nice feature to have in a district in which about 75 languages are spoken at home.

Marsella, who teaches seventh-grade English, said she's thrilled with the new system, because it allows her to communicate better with all parents, regardless of the language they speak.

"Their kids may not tell them everything, or they may not really know what's going on," she said.

In the past, she said, it might take 45 minutes to make five calls to parents at home.

With the new system, she can fire off multiple messages in about seven minutes.

TeleParent works through the computer by offering teachers preselected messages to send to parents.

The messages vary from announcements of upcoming tests to warnings that a student was chewing gum in class.

Cooper eighth-grade math teacher Grady Lane sends messages to parents when their children are tardy to class. He credited the system with helping to reduce the problem.

He said students will come into class and say warily, "Did you call my house last night?"

But Lane said he sends about as many positive messages as negative ones.

For instance, he sent messages praising seven students who didn't succumb to the temptation to join in a recent class disruption.

The system keeps track of those who listen to the entire message and those who hang up.

Marsella said some students began stammering when she asked them why someone hung up on her message.

"They feel like Big Brother's watching them," she said, smiling.

Hoover High School parent Carmen Murray said she likes the new system. She recently got a call saying her daughter was doing well in her second-period class.

Murray also liked the TeleParent voice, which she said wasn't robotic.

"It sounded more normal," she said. "It was very polite."

Kennedy said Fresno Unified will continue to try out the system through the end of December and sign a districtwide contract if officials are satisfied with the system.

Fresno Unified's board of trustees already approved a contract with TeleParent for \$172,000, pending successful completion of the trial.

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