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#### TOOLS OF THE TRADE

## Hands-Free Calling

English teacher Brandy Duncan announced this year that she would not accept late work.

That by itself wouldn't be noteworthy, except that no one has even *tried* to turn in anything late since she announced the policy. Not that her students deserve all the credit. Each night before a big assignment is due, the Huber Heights, Ohio, high school instructor makes sure all her students and their parents get reminder phone calls.

Fortunately for Duncan, she doesn't actually have to dial all those numbers: She merely records one message, and an automated system delivers it.

Duncan also posts assignments, notices, and reminders on the Web, but not all her students have computers and Internet access at home. Automated voice messaging lets teachers record summaries of their lessons and assignments, then send those messages to parents' land lines or cell phones at times determined in advance by each household. The system can even tap into schools' attendance databases to notify parents of absences.

The Education Connection—which Duncan uses—and competitor VoiceGate Corporation's Teacher's Assistant also help teachers schedule sick or personal leave; the systems make automated calls to substitute teachers on the school's list until the software finds a replacement. US Netcom and TeleParent Educational Systems' programmed lines let teachers record their messages in different languages.

Systems can be purchased for an individual school or an entire district; they cost roughly \$3 to \$6 per student per year. Duncan considers it money well spent: "I've told the administration what a huge gift it was to have such easy contact," she says.

**By Amanda Jones**

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