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Whittier Union HSD Links Parents, Teachers

by Linda L. Briggs

Introducing a new technology tool often has unexpected results. At Whittier Union High School District south of Los Angeles, teachers and parents are having more face to face interactions after the district introduced an automated system for contacting parents about student behavior.

"Teachers are saying that they have more phone and face to face contact with parents after notifying them using TeleParent," according to Carlye Marousek Olsen, director of accountability, staff development, and ed tech at Whittier Union High School District in Whittier, CA. TeleParent is an automated communication system that can be set to call or e-mail parents individually with any one of hundreds of messages, including positive ones about their child's behavior. After they receive calls from the automated system, Olsen said, parents seem to be more comfortable contacting teachers.

Schools in the district have also reported better classroom behavior overall and an increase in the amount of homework being completed. Whittier Union is a suburban district located about 10 miles southeast of the heart of Los Angeles; it serves more than 13,500 students at seven senior high schools. More than 40 percent of students receive free and reduced-fee lunches.

The system, which is accessed by teachers through the Internet, can either send e-mails or make phone calls; teachers log on to the TeleParent site and click specific boxes to choose what messages to send to which parents.

Although the district also uses an automated attendance calling system to alert parents when students are absent, Whittier is using TeleParent exclusively for messages from teachers to parents. Many of the messages are simple reminders: "Your child has a project due Friday," or, "Your child has a test this Thursday." Messages can also be positive, which can be a nice surprise for parents and students alike. "One parent called in tears thanking the teacher for sending a positive comment about their child--something they had not received since elementary school," Olsen said.

Since launching the product district-wide last fall, Whittier has also broadcast several district-wide and school-wide messages. The system can be set to send out a message immediately or at a set time. In one instance, students in a specific area were being accosted for their Apple iPods. The district sent a phone message to alert parents to the issue; perhaps coincidentally, suspects were arrested shortly thereafter.



Olsen said TeleParent's ease of use made it stand out when she compared it to comparable K-12 communication systems. "There were a couple of similar products, but they were much more complicated to use, and we felt teachers weren't going to use them."

Because the Whittier Union district is more than 80 percent Hispanic, an important TeleParent feature is the fact that it includes over 700 standard pre-recorded messages, with native-speaker translations into 22 languages, all as part of the product. Teachers can also record their own individual messages, if desired.

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