

Calling Home in Any Language

Anaheim (Calif.) Union High School District keeps connected to parents and the community.

By Kurt O. Dyrli

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PROBLEM

The Anaheim (Calif.) Union High School District includes 23 campuses with 37,000 students from five cities in the Anaheim area. Maintaining a connection with thousands of parents was a continual challenge for administrators and teachers alike, as the district is known for its incredible diversity, with families speaking some 50 languages. Correspondence through personal phone calls or letters was infrequent and cumbersome, causing a negative effect on the rate of absenteeism, test scores and behavioral issues. "We had an existing phone notification technology, but it could only do mass calling in English, primarily for emergencies, so it was rarely used," says Kim Bauerle, the district's family involvement coordinator. Because of the system's limited capabilities, it facilitated very little, if any, connection with parents. "We needed a better way to communicate with parents, even if they didn't speak English."



SOLUTION

Upon seeing a demonstration of the phone notification technology from Teleparent, AUHSD piloted the program in two district schools. "After the trial period, those pilot schools were so impressed, they would have purchased the technology on their own if the district did not," says Bauerle. AUHSD decided to purchase a three-year contract from the company in July 2007.

While automated calling systems have existed for years, the technology has come a long way. Today's incredibly fast and sophisticated Internet-based parental notification systems are not only able to call parents at a rate of thousands per minute, making them a highly effective tool for emergency notification, but they are also able to address a variety of other challenges, including regular communication with non-English-speaking parents.

The technology which AUHSD is now using can translate messages from English into over 170 languages, without requiring any hardware or additional phone lines. The system is designed for use by teachers, not just administrators, who are able to send individualized calls to parents by selecting prerecorded messages on a computer, similar to sending e-mail. These recorded calls address everything from unexcused absences to poor grades or disciplinary issues. But they also enable positive and proactive communication, such as praise for good behavior and high grades, or reminders about upcoming exams or events. Marsha Wagner, principal of Savannah High School, piloted the technology for the district. "Most parents will support the school if they understand what is going on," she says. "As soon as we could communicate with them immediately and in their home language, we witnessed an almost instant positive change in student behavior."

Even though use of Teleparent is voluntary, Bauerle estimates about 80 percent of AUHSD teachers use it regularly. "Teachers across the district are reporting more homework being turned in, fewer absences, higher test scores and fewer discipline problems," she says. "And we've been able to break through not just the language barrier but also the 'digital divide,' since many of our parents don't have computer access, so a phone call is the only way to get in touch."

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