

Case Study: Saline Area Schools



How a Michigan School District Transformed
Its Safety Strategy Using Mass Notification

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The Challenge

Saline Area Schools in Southeast Michigan needed to enhance safety and communication for its students and teachers. The district high school had a single point of access for initiating a lockdown and the technology and processes in place to send alerts were inefficient. When emergency messages were delivered, some people weren't receiving them, and those who did sometimes misinterpreted instructions because the message was unclear, creating potentially dangerous situations.

The Solution

The district implemented InformaCast, expanding the reach of its emergency messages to ensure every corner of its buildings no matter how isolated or noisy could receive clear, actionable messages to keep students and teachers safe. InformaCast created a unified system, connecting to devices throughout district buildings that could initiate alerts with the press of a button, ultimately streamlining the district's emergency response procedures and daily operations.

Communication Limitations Put Students and Teachers at Risk

Located just south of Ann Arbor Michigan, Saline Area Schools serves about 5,000 students and 600 teachers and staff. With multiple school buildings and student groups to protect, the district was looking for a simple, but effective way to expand the reach of its critical messages to ensure everyone received information that impacted their safety no matter where they were or what they were doing.

"We previously had a system only one person could access whether it was an emergency or any kind of announcement," said Dr. Stephen Laatsch, superintendent for Saline Area Schools. "We knew we needed multiple access points and alerts that used audio and visuals to alert everyone there was an issue."

These issues became apparent at Saline High School after two incidents occurred.

"Over the summer, a nearby business had an incident with an armed intruder," said Theresa Stager, principal at Saline High School. "Students were in summer classes and using the football field at the time. I needed to call the assistant principal who was in the high school at the time, let the secretaries know, and let the central district office know what was happening."



This cumbersome and time-consuming process highlighted the issue of being able to send alerts quickly, but another event made it clear that even when messages were delivered, people didn't always know what to do.

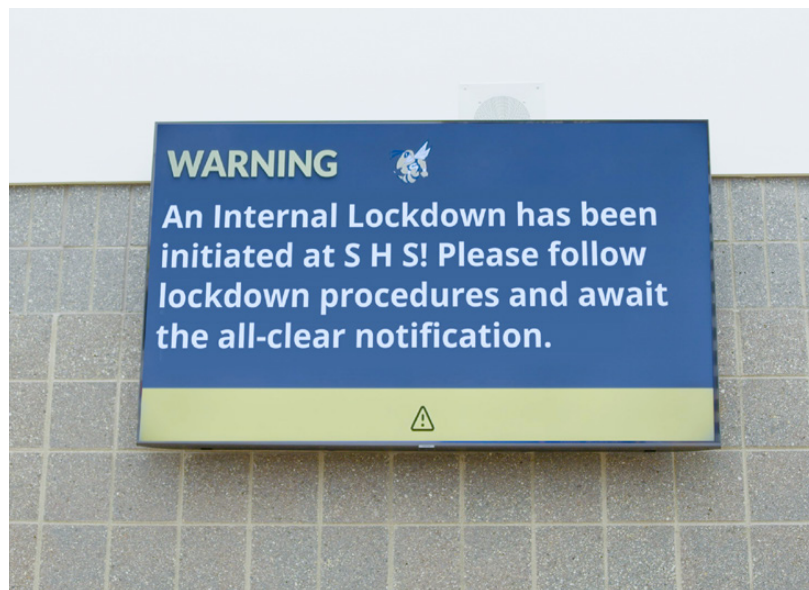
“We conducted a lockdown drill for an external threat,” explains Stager. “In that scenario, people were told to stay inside their classrooms. One of our louder classrooms only heard that there was a threat, and thought that if they had the opportunity, they should exit the building. This was the instruction we give for internal threats, but in this case, had there been a real emergency, that class could have been exposed to the threat that was outside the building.”

When a safety and security grant became available, Jay Grossman, director of technology for Saline Area Schools, began searching for a solution that would address these issues and found InformaCast, a mass notification and incident management solution from Singlewire Software.

Delivering Messages That Reach Everyone

Saline High School became the primary focus of the district’s InformaCast implementation. With about 550,000 square feet to cover and the need to reach classrooms, stairwells, and noisy areas like hallways, gymnasiums, and lunch rooms, as well as students with special needs, Grossman and his team set out to transform the way the district delivered emergency communications.

“What I like most about InformaCast is that it’s everywhere in our building,” said Stager. “It activates strobes lights and audio alerts, and it takes over phone screens, projector screens, and TVs. It alerts in a way that our louder classrooms can hear and know what’s happening, and it gives me peace of mind that if we have an intruder or need to get out of the building, I don’t need to double-check that everyone has gotten a message because I know that they will.”



Special considerations were taken to ensure devices connected to InformaCast would deliver audio and visual alerts during a crisis so no matter where someone was or what they were doing, they would understand an emergency was taking place. The district integrated InformaCast with its Cisco IP phones, Advanced Network Devices speakers, Rise Vision digital signage to deliver alerts, and added strobe lights above welding stations in the shop room, in stairwells, and underneath the theater where the pit orchestra plays.

“We have a diverse student body, some of whom have hearing impairments,” said Curt Ellis, assistant superintendent of human resources for Saline Area School, “so we were looking for a solution that could fill those gaps from the audio side and the visual side, and InformaCast has done that.”

In addition, to assist students who may be colorblind, Grossman used lights on speakers throughout the high school to indicate different kinds of events. Flashers on the left indicate an emergency while those on the right indicate an “All Clear.”

“I’ve found it is the most consistent way to get a message out to the most people in the shortest amount of time,” said Grossman.

Creating Safe Learning Environments for All

Previously, the alerting process at the high school required notifying the right people who had access to the right tools before the message could be shared with everyone. This created a lack of confidence in the school's ability to keep everyone safe and hindered the district's primary objective.

"If teachers and students don't feel safe, students won't be able to learn," said Dr. Laatsch. "If we don't have the safety piece right for teachers, students, and staff, it's going to be really hard to achieve our primary objective of student learning. Having a system that anyone in our buildings can use and participate in is really important."

InformaCast greatly expanded the accessibility and ease for teachers and staff to initiate an emergency notification.

"Any person in the building can very clearly initiate any of these things, which is huge," said Stager. "Teachers really find it efficient and effective. They feel better and safer knowing they're not going to need to stand out in the hall and yell or get in touch with me before an actual announcement goes out."

For Stager in particular, InformaCast has helped make it easier for her to keep her students and staff safe during an emergency.

"With InformaCast, I can open an app, set off the lockdown alert, lock the doors to the building, and alert everyone who needs to know," said Stager. "It's a massive time saver and it could help save a lot of lives."



A Future-Proof Safety Solution

InformaCast has enabled the district to make drastic safety and communication changes that address its immediate needs and set Saline up for long-term success.

"You want a partner that delivers information and security solutions that look to the future and won't become outdated," said Dr. Laatsch. "Our relationship with Singlewire has told us that InformaCast will evolve as our district and building needs evolve."

The benefits of that partnership became immediately evident when shown to other schools in the district.

"I think it's a system every school building should have," said Rex Clary, Executive Director of Operations for Saline Area Schools. "We did a pilot and when we brought in other administrators to see it, they all asked 'When do I get it?'"

Visit www.singlewire.com/informacast-k12-education for more information about how InformaCast mass notification can help enhance safety and communication at your school or district.