Enhancing K-12 School Safety Throughout The Year

A 12-Month Guide to Using Mass Notification and Critical Event Management Tools

Table of Contents

Introduction

Staying Safe and Informed Throughout the Year

For any K-12 school or district, safety should be a top concern. The best way to achieve a safe learning environment is by being able to access and share information as easily as possible. Leveraging tools and strategies that aid in distributing messages and providing step-by-step processes to alert people about and resolve incidents go a long way toward enhancing safety and security in schools and districts.

Many schools are turning to mass notification systems with critical event management features to help accomplish this goal, but safety is an ongoing process. It doesn't happen all at once, and it should never be thought of as something that can be done once and then left alone. Maintaining a safe learning environment requires continuous review and improvement to respond to the evolving needs of your school or district.

In this eBook, we will provide a detailed outline of activities and best practices your school or district can incorporate throughout the year to ensure everyone is informed about how to manage emergency situations.

JUNE + JULY: Preparing for Next Year

EVOLVING YOUR SCHOOL SAFETY PLAN

As hard as it might be, when the school year ends, it's time to start looking forward. While parents are getting supplies to prepare their students for the new school year, administrators and school security officers should be making sure they have everything in place to provide a safe learning environment. Part of that process involves reviewing the situations that could put students and staff at risk.

Identifying different scenarios with help from security, facilities, and other departments helps build a comprehensive safety plan for your school. Active shooters and severe weather might be obvious incidents to prepare for, but there may be less obvious ones like IT outages and medical issues that still deserve your attention. Mass notification systems can help you prebuild message templates and groups, creating an easily accessible emergency response plan. Once you're confident will the plan you've built, you can also look at adding and testing technology that will reach everyone during an emergency.

With mass notification, schools can send critical information to everyone who needs it using technology that's already in place. Desk phones, IP speakers, overhead paging, digital signage, desktop computers, and mobile devices can call be used to deliver messages, while panic buttons, security cameras, door access controls, and more can all be integrated to increase security at schools. The more opportunities your school can take advantage of the safer environment you will create.
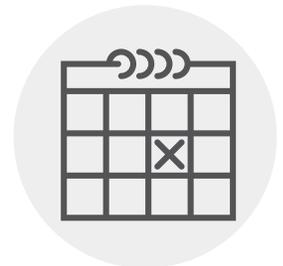
STANDARDIZING PROCEDURES TO SAVE TIME

In addition to reviewing what kind of events your school has prepared for, it's important to review the processes in place for executing those plans. Understand who is in charge of sending notifications when an emergency occurs and what channels will be used to send the alert. Some scenarios may only require a select group to be notified, while others may call for everyone to be alerted. Standardizing these practices before the school year begins can save time when an actual event occurs, and testing when buildings are primarily empty allows for room to correct mistakes during non-crucial moments.

# JUNE + JULY: Preparing for Next Year (cont.)

ANALYZE HOW YOU DISTRIBUTE INFORMATION

Once you have a plan in place for who will be notified during what situations, consider how you are distributing the information people need to help manage the event. Live audio delivered from speakers and overhead paging offers an intrusive means to interrupt classroom activities and overcome noisy hallways with important information. However, during an emergency, every available communication channel should be utilized. Look into how you can send messages as phone calls, SMS text messages, emails, and push notifications to quickly get information to the people that need it. Emergency notification systems should let you send messages in multiple formats to large groups simultaneously.

CONSIDER HOW YOU COLLABORATE

Of course, it's not enough just to send out a message. School leaders need to be able to assess situations as they unfold and deploy response teams to those in need of assistance. The option to join a conference call or virtual collaboration space via a mass notification offers a way to quickly gather key stakeholders who can determine the best course of action. Real-time insights and after-action reports can also provide much-needed context to understand what works and what doesn't when your school responds to an emergency. Conducting testing and training during off-months allows time for people to get familiar with tools and procedures and correct mistakes or errors before a critical event occurs.

Taking these steps in June and July will go a long way toward being prepared when school starts in the fall.

InformaCast
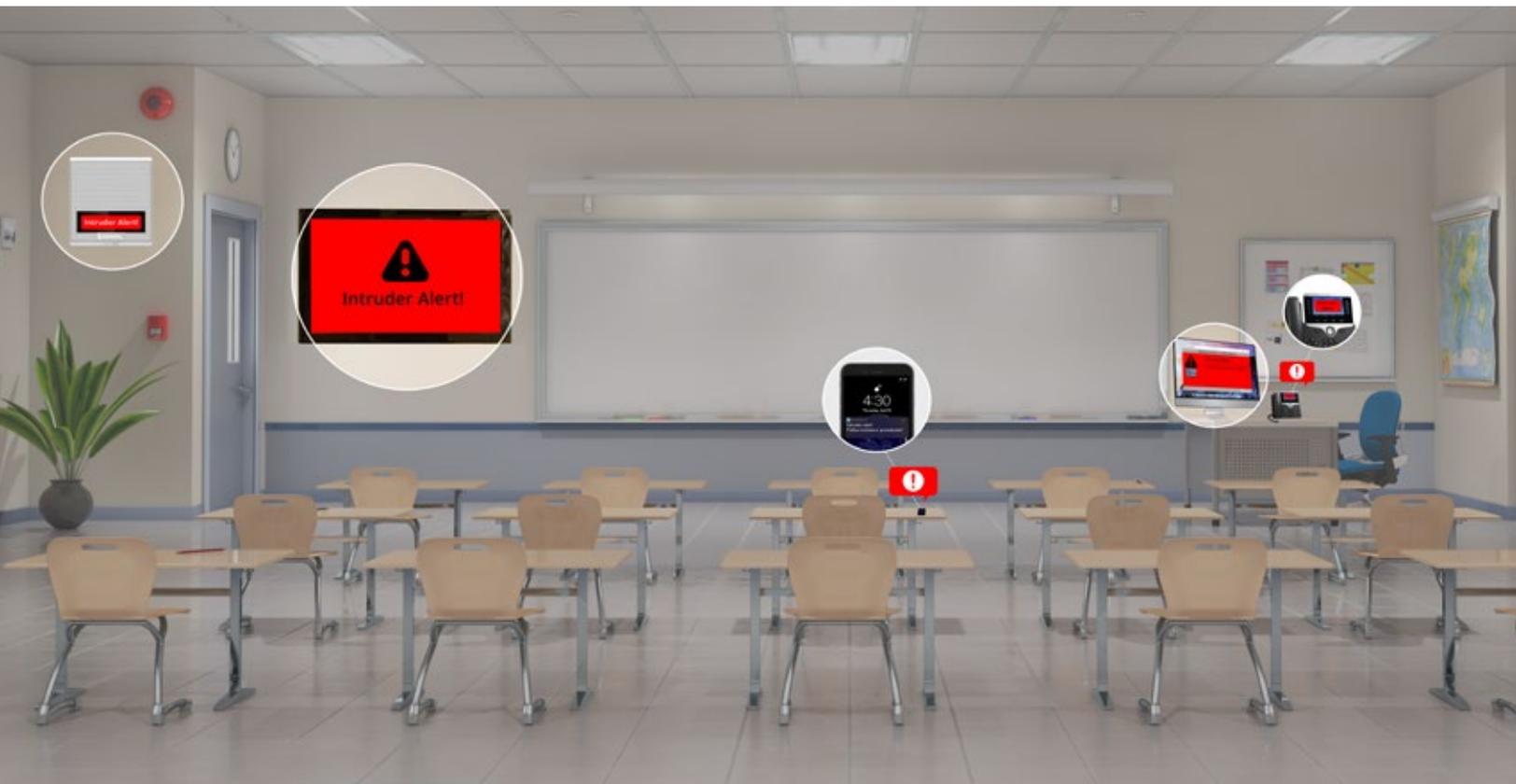
AUGUST: Eliminate Siloed Technology

SHARE CRITICAL INFORMATION

After you've made your plan, it's time to streamline your environment. In K-12 schools, there are many people to reach and many ways to reach them. This often means that schools have multiple disparate communication systems. Each one might require a different log-in, or have a different person who manages it. That means when you need to get an urgent message out, you're wasting valuable time trying to make sure that you've activated every communication tool you have.

A mass notification system though can tie all your different devices and systems together on the backend, resulting in a single pane of glass to manage and activate your critical messages. This provides a simpler and more efficient way to send out notifications and aligns different tools so they all communicate clear consistent messages. To help identify opportunities to eliminate siloed technology, we've put together this infographic with seven tips you can use to help enhance connectivity and communication in your school.

Student safety is a top priority for any K-12 school. Streamlining communication systems makes it easier to share information that keeps people safe.

7 Tips to Enhance K-12 Communication and Connectivity
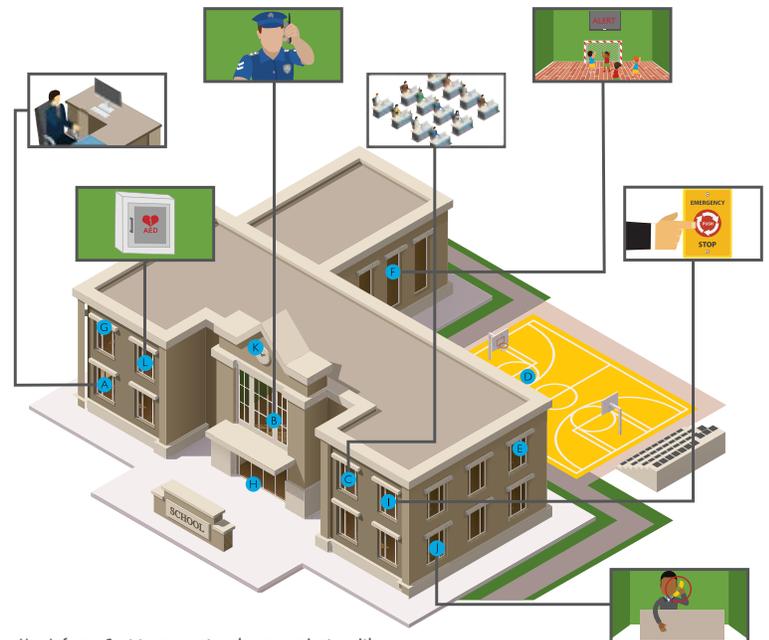
Use InformaCast to connect and communicate with

A Administrator/Security Office	E Overhead speaker	I Panic buttons
B Mobile phones	F Digital signage	J Landline phones
C Computer desktops	G School bells	K Clocks
D Outdoor speaker	H Door access	L AED Box

1. Utilize a single system to manage all your messages, groups and devices

2. Reach people on mobile devices

3. Automate as much as possible
(Bells, weather alerts, recurring announcements)

4. Tie into the Internet of Things
(Door locks, digital signage, panic buttons, AED boxes)

5. Get in front of people on their desk phones and computers

6. Utilize speakers inside and out to achieve maximum reach

7. Monitor phones to know when 911 is called

singlewire
InformaCast

SEPTEMBER: Scheduling School Bells

SET UP YOUR SCHEDULE FOR THE WHOLE YEAR

As school is about to start, consider setting your bell schedule for the upcoming year. It may not seem like school bells are an important part of school safety, but properly functioning school bells are crucial to the flow and productivity of your school or district. Setting them early will help you avoid headaches down the road. Here are a few things to consider when you set up your bell schedule:

1. Think about who will hear your bell tones.
What are the needs of your staff and students? Would a soft or familiar bell tone help younger students get acquainted with school bells? Do your students and staff need to be able to hear bells in a large, busy school?

2. Decide what you'd like your bell tones to communicate.
Would you like to have different tones communicate different things? (e.g. one announces that a class period has begun, another announces a class period has ended) Would you like to play passing music? Will scheduled announcements be part of your bell schedule?

3. Consider where you would like your bell tones to reach.
Perhaps you'd like to have separate bells for different floors, or if you have a blended campus, you'd like to have separate bells for the elementary school classrooms and the middle school classrooms.

4. Schedule when you would like your bells to sound.
After you have thought through the first three items, it's time to create your bell schedule. When you choose to have your bells sound depends on the personal needs of your school or district. Perhaps you want to have a bell to announce the beginning and end of each class period. Maybe you'd like to have a five-minute warning bell. Think about what type of schedule would work best for your staff and students.

5. Plan for unexpected changes.
Come up with a plan for how you will change your bell schedules for early release, inclement weather, teacher in-service—anything that would disrupt the normal flow of the day. Robust mass notification systems will allow you to preplan these exceptions and offer flexibility to respond to changing needs.

OCTOBER: Schoolwide Communication

EASING WOES WITH SCALABLE SOLUTIONS

After the school year has begun, you may start to encounter unseen issues. Events may impact procedures and certain systems may not work as advertised. You may also find you aren't reaching as many people as you need to with critical messages, or the messages aren't going to the right people when they do go out.

Necedah Area School District, a rural district located in central Wisconsin, was encountering similar issues. The district houses its elementary, middle, and high school in one building. With 700 students and 130 staff and faculty, communicating messages to the right audiences is a crucial component of running day-to-day operations smoothly.

When Kris Saylor, director of technology at Necedah, had the opportunity to renovate the district's overhead paging system, he knew he needed a solution that would provide better reach than the current analog system. With three schools in one building, he needed to be able to designate messages for the right audience and upgrade his speakers to ones that offered better sound quality.

"We had speakers placed every six feet throughout the school, but no one could hear anything," said Saylor. He needed a system that was flexible, easy to use, and reached everyone. So he turned to a mass notification solution.

BRINGING EVERYTHING TOGETHER

Saylor installed IP speakers throughout the building to provide clear audio and scrolling-text announcements. With the help of the emergency notification software, he and his team have been able to drastically improve how they schedule bells, configure zones and send messages.

Currently, the district has zones set up to reach everyone in the building: a zone each for the elementary, middle, and high school, one combined middle and high school zone, one zone for outside speakers, and one zone specifically for the gymnasium.

This streamlined the steps needed to make a page, saving time when critical information needed to be shared.

NOVEMBER: Mobile Matters

ACCES FROM ANYWHERE

As the calendar year winds down, it can be a good time to look at ways to reach people on more devices. Mobile devices may seem like a concern for higher ed institutions that have students who are spread out across a campus, but K-12 districts and schools can also benefit from mass notification systems that utilize a mobile component.

One of the biggest advantages of using a system with a mobile application is that emergency messages can be sent from anywhere. When a crisis occurs, every second counts and that time shouldn't be wasted needing to get to a desk phone or desktop computer to log into a web interface. The messages and scenarios you set up at the beginning of the year can also be reflected in the app. With just a few taps, detailed notifications can be sent out the moment someone notices an incident occurring.

MOBILE PANIC BUTTONS

That flexibility of easily triggering a message can also be extended to teachers and other staff members to request personal assistance. If an issue arises in a classroom, teachers can use their mobile phones to trigger a preconfigured panic button. System administrators will receive a notification that the button has been pressed with the user's location so they can deploy a response or connect directly to offer assistance.

CONFIRMATION RESPONSE

During a crisis, school leaders need to know who is safe and who needs help. Using mobile alerts, they can ask recipients to respond to simple questions, such as "Are you safe?" or "Have you evacuated the school building?" Users can respond with "Yes" or "No" and provide system administrators with real-time insights about who is safe and who needs help. Insights can also be used to see who has received and read messages and who needs to be sent a follow notification.

GEO-LOCATION

Some systems will also utilize GPS to establish an area of interest for emergency notifications. Using GPS coordinates, you can define an area that can include an entire district, a school block, or whatever area you think is pertinent. Then, using the GPS in people's mobile phones, you can configure the system to send alerts to everyone inside that area, or be alerted when someone (like school guests) or something (approaching severe weather) enters the area.

DECEMBER: Reunification

UNDERSTANDING THE AFTERMATH

As you prepare for your winter break, it's important to consider how you will handle the aftermath of an event. This can include evaluating your reunification strategy to best reconnect students and staff with family and loved ones concerned about their safety. Reunification can often be associated with an active shooter event, but other emergencies like building issues, severe weather, and fires, can also require evacuation and reunification plans.

PLANNING AHEAD

Mass notification systems can help schools reach large groups of people quickly, including parents and guardians. Your school would want to create a separate group for parents and guardians that could be reached via SMS text, email, and phone calls with a message that is different than the one being broadcast throughout your school. Ideally, your reunification process will be documented and communicated well ahead of any emergency. However, during chaotic situations, people cannot be expected to remember information that was shared weeks or months ago. Leveraging mass notification can provide in-the-moment updates to inform parents about an ongoing situation, and where they should go to reunite with their children.

This can help divert parents who may instinctually want to come to the school. Having people rush to the school can cause traffic issues for first responders trying to assist with managing the situation and can put more people in harm's way. Mass notifications can help remind people that reunification takes place in a separate building and that is where they should go.

REDUCING CONFUSION AND WORRY

In addition to instructing parents on where to go, school leaders can help reduce confusion and worry by using mass notification to share updates about the ongoing situation. Initial alerting can let people know an event is taking place, and subsequent messages can offer more details that help parents understand the severity of the situation, how the school is responding, and when they can expect more information. Using official channels regularly also helps combat speculation and rumors from social media and other unreliable sources. This can be difficult to manage in real-time, so it may be beneficial for schools to have a designated staff member who can manage updates to parents while other school officials focus on managing the situation at the school level.

REMINDING STUDENTS

Of course, it's not just parents who may need reminders about where to go and what to do following a school emergency. Students within the school may need reminders and instructions about what to do once a situation is resolved. This can ease student worries and let them know that they will soon be reunited with their parents.

JANUARY: Developing Clear Communication

REDUCE NOISE AND MINIMIZE MISINFORMATION

A new year brings new opportunities to improve processes and procedures for emergency communications. During a crisis situation, communications can quickly become muddled. Conflicting reports from social media, news outlets, and district or school officials can lead to unnecessary confusion and fear among students and staff. Having a system in place that provides clear and consistent messaging can help build confidence that the information being shared is accurate and reliable

7 TIPS FOR PROVIDING CLEAR COMMUNICATIONS DURING A CRISIS

1. Utilize a Single System - One system makes it much easier to send consistent messages. The more systems you use the more risk there is that information gets changed or left out of a message. A single system also helps reduce the time it takes to get a message out, meaning there less time for inaccurate information to spread.

2. Build Message Templates – Prepare for any scenario by pre-building message templates. These messages can be sent immediately at the onset of a crisis to provide basic information that initiates safety procedures.

3. Designate Groups – Use your notification system to determine who receives certain messages. During an emergency, everyone should receive an alert, but to help manage the crisis, instructional follow-up messages might only need to be sent to certain groups. Select these groups ahead of time for more efficient crisis management.

4. Reach Multiple Devices – Your system should reach landline phones, speakers, mobile devices, desktops computers, and digital displays. Every available device should be sharing the same information to inform students and staff of the situation.

5. Send in Multiple Formats – Ensure you reach everyone by sending your notification in multiple formats. Audio, visual, and text alerts make it more likely everyone receives your message during a crisis and stays on the same page.

6. Provide Regular Updates – Combat misinformation by sending customized follow-up messages after your initial alert goes out. Include more specific information about the situation and what steps students and staff should be taking to remain safe until it has been resolved.

7. Gather Your Team – Certain systems will give you the ability to instantly bring together your crisis management team in a conference call or virtual space. This is especially helpful when you need to connect school and district officials who are likely in separate locations and need firsthand accounts of what is happening.

FEBRUARY: Utilizing Desktop Computers

SEND MESSAGES THAT DEMAND ATTENTION

As technology becomes a more integral part of everyday learning, schools should look to leverage desktop computers as part of their emergency communication plan. While email and text messages may seem like sufficient ways to deliver messages, many schools don't allow students to have cell phones on them in classrooms, and emails are often a passive form of communication. Using a mass notification system that connects directly to computer desktops to display messages the moment they are sent helps ensure everyone is informed.

Here are five ways schools can leverage desktop notifications to share information.

POP-UP MESSAGES ON DESKTOP SCREENS

These messages will pop up over whatever other applications someone may be using. This is often the most effective method for getting your message in front of someone on their desktop. The user will not be able to pull up any new applications over the pop-up message until they acknowledge the message.

SCROLL TICKER MESSAGES ALONG THE BOTTOM

Having the ability to have messages scroll along the bottom of a computer screen similar to cable news tickers is a less obtrusive option than the pop-up, and can still include the necessary information to keep people informed.

TOAST NOTIFICATIONS

Toast notifications will linger for a few seconds before disappearing. Users can click on it for a more detailed message.

TRAY NOTIFICATIONS

In certain circumstances, the work being done on desktops is critical, and cannot be interrupted. In those situations, a tray notification is most appropriate. On Macs, the system icon will typically jump to indicate a new message is available. On Windows, a number will appear over the icon to signal a new message.

CLOUD-BASED NOTIFICATIONS

For schools that follow a hybrid or remote learning model, or for schools that do have desktop computers connected directly to their network, cloud-based notifications provide a way to share information directly to these devices.

CUSTOMIZATION

When looking at a system that offers desktop notification, another important feature is customization. Make sure messages can be fully customized, including font type, size and color, and background color. If a system allows your school or district logo to be included, it helps clarify who the message is coming from.

MARCH: Learning From Others

DEVELOPING A MORE EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

As you work to build out and enhance your emergency response plan, it can be helpful to learn what has worked for others schools so you can implement similar tools and procedures. Here are a few examples of real schools across the country that have used mass notification to address pressing safety and communication concerns.

MOBILE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Challenge: WP Davidson High School in Mobile, Ala., needed to find a way to unify its disparate systems with a technology solution that could be implemented in an older school building as serve as a model for the rest of its district.

The Solution: Working with Mobile County Public Schools, the high school used mass notification software as the backbone for a new alerting solution that connected with other security and communication technologies to keep students and faculty safe and informed.

LENAWEE INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL DISTRICT

The Challenge: The Lenawee Intermediate School District in Lenawee County, Mich. needed to replace outdated and unreliable technology to help enhance safety and security for students, staff, and visitors.

The Solution: The district deployed a unified communications solution, including mass notification software, to help meet evolving school safety needs as well as bolster communication during emergency events.

REDLANDS UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

The Challenge: The Redlands Unified School District (RUSD) in Redlands, Calif. needed a tool to automate its school bell system, conduct paging, and send IT and emergency alerts for situations like earthquakes to its new elementary and high schools. Since RUSD is a large district that consists of several separate school buildings, they also needed to communicate critical information between locations.

The Solution: The district turned to mass notification software to connect communications between its separate facilities. This allowed RUSD to coordinate efforts, such as sending weather alerts and communicating with parents and the public. It also helps the schools' earthquake readiness efforts when participating in a state-wide emergency preparedness activity.

APRIL: Severe Weather Prep

PLAN TO GET THE WORD OUT

Summer is coming, and with it, an increased possibility of severe weather. To protect students and staff, you need to develop efficient methods for monitoring potential weather events, and getting the word out to protect people when threatening weather approaches.

PLAN TO GET THE WORD OUT

Here are a few questions for you to consider when creating or updating your severe weather response plan:

- How do staff members currently learn about weather alerts?
- Do people listen to a weather radio or wait to hear outdoor sirens?
- Who is in charge of initiating an alert to your organization?
- What information will be included in a weather alert?
- Have you identified safe places where people should seek shelter?
- Can staff trigger notifications if they're away from their desk?

STAY INFORMED

A mass notification system capable of keeping you and your staff informed wherever you are can help provide an answer to many of these questions by:

- Monitoring for alerts from the National Weather Service.
- Pre-building messages and automatically notifying the right people when severe weather approaches.
- Allowing you to gather your safety team together to discuss response efforts.
- Sending emergency alerts to your entire organization via several different devices, such as overhead paging systems, IP phones, digital signs, mobile devices, and more.

IDENTIFY SAFE PLACES

One of the key components of this safety strategy is providing people with a location they should go to when severe weather approaches. Taking action and getting to a safe location can mean the difference between escaping harm, injury, or death. Consider what the hazard is and how that impacts where your people should go. Should they shelter in place (tornado) or evacuate (hurricane)? Go low (tornado) or go high (tsunami or flash flood)? Answering these questions in advance can help save time and get people to safety quickly.

MAY: Managing Graduation

PREPARE FOR AN INFLUX OF VISITORS

The school year is winding down, and your school or district is likely preparing for graduation celebrations. Even if visitors will only be on school grounds for a few hours, it's just as important to keep them safe and informed as it is for students and staff.

SIMPLICITY IS KEY

An easy way to keep people informed is by reaching them on their mobile devices. Certain mass notification systems will allow visitors to opt-in to receive alerts. Using their mobile phone, they can text a number with a simple message to begin receiving notifications via SMS text messages. Visitors can also register via a web browser. From active shooters to severe weather, any type of emergency can occur at almost any time. When sending communications to students and families about graduation, include instructions for how they can register to receive notifications. Include information on signs around schools during graduation weekend. It might also be helpful to include links to other safety resources and instructions to shelter locations in the event of severe weather.

Send a sample message to encourage registration, such as "To receive notifications during graduation, text #GradDay to 555-555-5555." Graduation can be hectic, so having a source that sends out instructions and reminders about events taking place can be helpful for visitors.

BEYOND GRADUATION

Once graduation is over, begin thinking about events taking place next school year that may involve an influx of visitors. Sporting events, guest speakers, concerts, and more, may draw people not typically on school grounds. When people purchase tickets, include information about how they can opt-in for emergency notification alerts, and during the event include opt-in instructions on signage around schools.

Conclusion

One Tool For All Your School Safety Needs

Strong school safety starts with a solid foundation of communication. It is a year-round effort, and while it is no simple task, there are tools that can help overcome the challenges you face.

InformaCast mass notification and critical event management software helps bring together disparate systems in one interface, allows you to pre-build messages for any emergency scenarios you may face, and gives you the ability to reach everyone in your school with the press of a button. You can also use InformaCast to automate daily tasks like school bell schedules and daily announcements to keep everything running smoothly.

Visit singlewire.com/informacast-k12-education to learn how using InformaCast can enhance communication and safety in your school or district.