

Rural District Scores Measurable Improvements with Better Communication

When Beaufort County Schools administrators needed to connect with thousands of working parents, they turned to the AlertNow™ service to facilitate messaging on a variety of issues, from attendance to late buses and charges on student cafeteria accounts. According to Sarah Hodges, the district's public information officer, "Keeping parents involved is critical to student achievement. With AlertNow, we're able to engage parents in a consistent, timely, personalized manner. And our parents love it: we hear from them all the time about how much it means to them to be able to stay connected."

CHALLENGE: Rural district faces socio-economic and transportation challenges

Located in the eastern coastal region of North Carolina, Beaufort County Schools (BCS) employs 1,015 fulltime staff and operates 14 schools. The district enrolls 7,000 students, of whom 60 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. In the past few years, the area has experienced an influx of non-English speakers, and at varying times up to 11 home languages are spoken by BCS students and their families.

Like any rural school district, Beaufort County faces multidimensional challenges related both to economics and geography. District students are distributed over three attendance areas and 828 square miles, and 64 percent of students rely on district-funded transportation services. Transportation is further complicated by a river that divides the district in two. In addition, the district has one of the highest dropout rates in the state, and a significant percentage of parents work multiple jobs. "Our parents want to be involved, but because they're working long hours just to make ends meet, they don't have the time or the flexibility to meet teachers one-on-one," said Sarah Hodges, the district's public information officer. "Yet connecting with them on a regular basis is absolutely key to ensuring ongoing student achievement."

SOLUTION: AlertNow

Prior to 2008, the district's communication capabilities were limited. Administrators relied on "backpack" messages for general outreach—"once a week, we sent a paper folder home with students"—and the media to announce weather delays and bus route changes. According to Hodges, "We were one of many school districts served by three television stations and a few radio stations, so in inclement weather you had to take a number and wait and see when your cancellation would be announced. Parents and bus drivers would often find out at the last possible second."

Quick Facts

- › Serves nearly 7,000 students in grades K-12
- › Home to 7 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, 4 high schools and 1 ed-tech center
- › Rural district on eastern shore of North Carolina



The district implemented the AlertNow service in 2008 and began using the service for a variety of messaging, including attendance notification, transportation updates and emergency messages. “Having such a diverse and separated county due to our geographic situation, technology is the key to facilitating communication,” said Hodges. “With AlertNow, it’s easy for us to get information to everyone quickly and reliably.”

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Sarah Hodges
Public Information Officer
Beaufort County Schools

RESULTS: Meaningful improvement in attendance and parental engagement

By using the AlertNow service to reach out to parents and the community at large, the district has seen measurable improvements in everything from daily attendance to low lunch balance accounts. “In tandem with intervention programs, the messaging has had a positive effect on attendance. It’s gone very, very well, and we’ve seen an incredible difference at two of our high schools,” said Hodges. “Parents have given us great feedback about being able to stay up on what their child is or is not doing. When report cards go out, and there are a high number of absences, parents are no longer surprised. It’s increased parent participation quite a bit.”

The district also uses the service regularly to keep parents informed and aware of any changes to transportation schedules, critical during the winter months when children may have to wait outside in the cold for long periods of time. “We’re required to let parents know if the bus is

running more than 15 minutes late,” said Hodges. “We have the bus lists for each school in AlertNow, and we can call parents within minutes to let them know what’s going on. Parents love it because they can pick up their children and ensure they stay warm if the bus is delayed.”

Use of the service has also resulted in measurable cost savings, particularly in the area of child nutrition. “We use AlertNow on a regular basis from the eighth grade down to ensure parents are aware of charges on student cafeteria accounts,” said Hodges. “It takes our child nutrition directors and principals all of five minutes to generate the list and do the call.” Savings have been significant in both dollars and human resource hours. “We’ve eliminated the costs of printing and distributing and the time it would take to tracking each child down—we’ve easily saved a couple of hours a week in work time.”

For BCS, using AlertNow to stay in contact with parents has had a positive effect on parental involvement. “We are a low wealth area, and we have many parents who are working from one to three jobs. They want to be at the school, they want to be a part of things, but they’re simply working enough to keep the family going, so it’s not an option. We’re getting feedback from working parents on how much it means to be able to stay connected.” Recently, a district principal received a thank you call from a parent of a child with known disciplinary problems. “The parent wanted to thank the principal for letting her know her child was absent. She basically said that she couldn’t do it all by herself and to know that the school was there to help her was very comforting.”

Hodges regularly recommends the AlertNow service to districts committed to addressing parental engagement and student achievement through communication. “Keeping parents involved is critical to student achievement. With AlertNow, we’re able to engage parents in a consistent, timely, personalized manner. And our parents love it: we hear from them all the time about how much it means to them to be able to stay connected.”