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Superintendent Richard Fry records a call that the Global Connect system can send around the school district at a rate of 200 calls a minute. (Submitted photo)

System gets emergency word out

By Linda Franz, Sentinel Reporter, March 16, 2007

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Because Friday already was scheduled as a day off for students at Big Spring School District, officials don't need to worry about notifying parents of a delay, closure or early dismissal.

But if they did, a new Global Connect School Communication System, being used on a six-month trial basis, allows telephone calls to be made from the district to parents and staff in about 10 minutes.

"The first time we went district-wide, we called 1,964 families," says David Martin, the district's technology coordinator. "It takes about five minutes to get the whole thing ready. Once you click 'send,' it makes 200 calls a minute."

With the click of a few buttons on a computer or cell phone, school officials can deliver telephone messages throughout the district instantly by logging onto the Global Connect site, recording a message, selecting the appropriate call list and scheduling the distribution time. Information can be customized for emergency notification, absenteeism/tardiness, announcements, surveys and other uses.

Superintendent Richard Fry says the system so far has been used mostly for weather-related delays, cancelations and early dismissals.

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"Because of weather, we've had several schedule changes that we've been able to let families know about," Fry says. "We've also used it as a communication tool for PSSA preparation, just as a reminder to families."

Emergency tool

He thinks the most important use for Global Connect could be during an emergency.

"Thankfully we haven't had to use it like that and hopefully we'll never have to, but if we do, we know it's there," Fry says.

He pointed to the tornado that touched down in Alabama recently, killing several students at a high school. If a similar incident occurred locally, "We could let parents know we're in a severe weather situation, these are the steps that we've taken, talk about student pick-up and things like that," Fry says.

So far, the system is getting high marks from the public.

"We've gotten, overwhelmingly, a number of positive comments," Martin says.

Staff members also love the new system. A single phone call to each staff member has replaced the "phone chain" used in the past.

The system was piloted at Newville Elementary School before going district-wide. When a notice went out that school would be held Feb. 19 to make up for a snow day, attendance at Newville — the only school where parents were notified through Global Connect — was the highest in the

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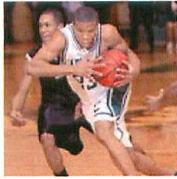
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The Global Connect emergency call system can be set up to mass-deliver a message in just five minutes. (Submitted photo)

district, Martin says.

The phone numbers called come from contact information submitted by students' families at the beginning of school year.

"We import all the students and parents, from our student management system, into this Web-based system," Martin explains. "Once you import it, you can pull it in by groups."

Parents from Oak Flat were notified that a Saturday event has been postponed until March 24 because of today's weather. Sports teams could be notified if practice were canceled.

When the first district-wide call went out, Martin discovered that 71 phone numbers were invalid.

"We use that as a tool to correct it," he says. "We tracked down all but 13 and we're tracking them down now."

Keeping it simple

The system has the capability of calling multiple numbers for each student, but so far, Big Spring is keeping it simple at a single number.

"Right now it's their main contact number in the district," Martin says.

So far the district is just scratching the surface of things that can be done.

"We're still building the potential," Fry says.

He plans to use the system to encourage people to vote during this spring's primary, when an Act 1 referendum will be on the ballot. While no advice on how to vote will be given, some facts on what the tax shift will mean to the district and residents can be provided.



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