

Technology that Saves Money and Saves Face

Often getting the word out can prevent a rumor from taking on a life of its own.

By Rosa Cirianni

When news broke about middle school students wearing gang paraphernalia and a gang initiation, the rumor mill in Lumberton Township began to churn.

The district, however, took control of the situation with electronic announcements sent to parents through its Listserv, or e-mail distribution list, and was able to dispel rumors fast by giving its community the facts.

“From a PR point of view, and this is something that you can’t pay for, the good will that we’ve created by instituting (Listserv) has been invaluable,” said Betsy Kapulskey, director of communications and grant writer for Lumberton.

The Burlington County school district had the capability to send parents updates by the hour. It used e-mail to give parents a heads up about a newscast set to feature its middle school and the gang issue. Listserv set the record straight—before the story hit the airwaves.

“Parents were very appreciative of the fact that we were sending this information so quickly. We didn’t have to try to get letters written, Xeroxed and sent home in backpacks. We were just able at the touch of a button, to literally e-mail whoever we needed to e-mail,” Kapulskey said.

She told parents: “You’re going to see a piece on this station and some of the information that they have is not accu-rate so be aware of that when you’re watching.”

The scenario is just one example of how New Jersey school districts are using technology to save not just time and money, but also to save face. Often getting the word out can prevent a situation from taking on a life of its own in a small community.

Online Advantages While the use of computers and the Internet are nothing new in public education, New Jersey districts are becoming more sophisticated in their use of these technologies.

Examples include the Bridgewater-Raritan Regional School District in Somerset County and the Wanaque Borough Public Schools in Passaic County that each offer a program called Homework Hero. The program allows teachers to post homework assignments, curriculum, test schedules and other reminders for students and parents online.

Another example is Haddon Township School District in Camden County, which uses the Web to give the public an opportunity to sign up for district e-mail announcements. The district also posts lunch menus online.

Technology: The Norm The state Department of Education reported in 2005 that 94 percent of school districts in the state have a district technology coordinator, and 82 percent of teachers give students assignments that require the use of tech-nology, according to the department's annual New Jersey Public School Technology Survey.

In 2004, the latest statistics available, 94 percent of districts had a Web site.

Lumberton's public information system groups parents' e-mail by grade, which allows the district to target its messages to particular groups or districtwide with e-blasts, or notices about important information.

Electronic district newsletters alone have saved the Lumberton school district about \$10,000 annually in overhead, photocopies and postage, said Mark Leung, director of educational technology for the district.

Vineland, like Lumberton, also has one main computer server that cost the district about \$10,000 to administer all the district's computers in its 21 buildings rather than having one for each building at another \$5,000 each, said Stephen Dantine, supervisor of technology for Vineland public schools.

Going Paperless Local school boards throughout the state are increasingly forgoing their traditional reliance on bulky meeting agenda packets that often include attachments for personnel, financial and other district-related data. Instead, they are equipping their board members, who serve without pay, with lap tops and setting up programs that allow the members to tap into district Web sites for information from home and during public meetings.

NJSBA began offering a program in July that will allow boards to access their information using a login and pass-word from any Internet-connected computer. Several school districts are considering the service. The Vineland school district in Cumberland County created a system of its own a few years ago.

Dantine said his kindergarten through grade 12 district of 11,000 students has given its board members lap tops and put meeting agendas and supporting documents online and on CDs.

"Instead of making nine copies of the papers and then for the solicitors, and then for the superintendent, and the school business administrator, and for everybody else, no, we don't do that any more," Dantine said. "We just use a CD, and CDs are like 20 cents.

"There's all the time that you have (saved) from copying all that paper. Not just the paper, but spending five hours of the superintendent's secretary's time copying stuff."

Leung said Lumberton also moved its board to paperless meetings after his superintendent attended a National School Boards Association conference and learned about a similar system in 2000.

"The biggest obstacle was not the money. It was what they call a change process, getting people on board," Leung said. "Some of the board members are older, of the next generation. They really weren't born with the technology. "

"We looked at how much we were spending in terms of paper cost, overhead, to make the copies, copy machines, etc. and really at that point in time what we found was the equipment purchase really wasn't that expensive and the sav-ings was going to be tremendous," Leung added.

Lumberton's investment paid off in two years. They spent \$15,000 in 2000 to buy the software from a technology company that specialized in wiring up hospitals to make them more efficient. And since the program began, the district has saved \$5,000 annually by not having to buy extra copy machines and paper and wasting staff time on making photo copies and dispersing them through teachers to students. Often, as most educators know, notices never make it out of backpacks and into the hands of parents.

Dantine estimates that Vineland saves about \$50,000 in paper and staff time, annually, by using technology. "We just really don't use paper anymore. In matter of fact, when we get paper, we're like, 'What's that?'" Dentinne said.

He recalled having to train board members using the lap tops during a televised public meeting. Looking back on it, he said the board member making an effort to use technology was a good thing for the community to see.

"It showed them learning to the rest of the teachers and the students in the district. They were learning technology, too," he said. "It showed them as an example and I would use that and say listen, 'They're going to do it, now you're going to do it'."

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