

Public Advocacy



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No More ‘Game of Phones’

Apps make communications easier during emergencies

KIRSTEN ZAZO KNEW THAT

students in California’s Alameda Unified School District were planning to stage a walkout on the one-month anniversary of the Florida high school shooting that left 17 dead. As the district’s chief student support officer, she wanted to keep tabs on them for their safety.

So she turned to an app.

Zazo’s district has used Share 911, an application developed by a former New Jersey school board member, since it became available in 2013. The app allows school district personnel to share information with staff, law enforcement, and first responders in seconds and in real time.

“We had 820 students who marched,

and we tracked where they were at all times using the safety check application,” Zazo says. “We had thought about using a text thread among the adults who were there, but this was an easy way for them to confirm that the students had made it safely” to a city park that served as a rallying point.

The measures schools have taken to enhance security have evolved greatly in the almost two decades since the Columbine High School shooting. However, internal communications when a situation erupts have always been a sticking point. Solutions that work well and easily often are overlooked and underrated, complicated in part by an ongoing unease about what technology can and

should do in crisis situations.

What’s acknowledged is that the “Game of Phones” approach — using landlines, intercom systems, and pagers to communicate with staff and with emergency officials — has become outdated. Emergency response systems that provide instant communication increasingly is expected, if not demanded, in a society where students, staff, and parents have smartphones at their fingertips.

Today, a simple internet search will result in names such as Elerts, EmergenSee, InformaCast, Lokdown, SchoolPass, and TapShield, all of which provide various security services using cloud-based apps. The field is growing rapidly, and given what took place in Parkland, Florida, earlier this year, shows no signs of slowing soon.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

Recently, while talking to a former co-worker in North Carolina about the winter that seemed like it would never end, I mentioned the four-plus years I spent on “snow patrol” — the 5 a.m. phone tree that would dispense information to the district’s 25 principals and central office staff about school closings.

Before long, the conversation expanded to school safety and a tornado that had struck one of the county’s downtown areas just after classes had ended for the day. We were very lucky; the tornado’s path came within 100 yards of four schools. While I was pleased with our communications approach, information was flying so fast and furious that I know I missed some things. And communicating by fax — email was still relatively new and not yet institutionalized — was inefficient.

“Imagine,” I said to my friend, “if we had the tools at our disposal that

we do now. It would have made things so much easier.”

That ease of use is the theory behind Share911 and its competitors. Employees who have these apps can get reports about incidents—where the danger is, whether students are safe and accounted for, what is happening—in a text-like format. The best part is that the reports come in real time with no delays.

Erik Endress, who served on the school board in his hometown of Ramsey, New Jersey, started working on the idea with a policeman friend. Endress, who has been a rescue squad volunteer in Ramsey since he was in high school, saw the need for increased communication in schools while working with districts as an education technology specialist for the New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA).

“I would go into districts and see my peers and see people with mobile devices, and none of this stuff was being used in an emergency,” Endress says. “I started asking people about what they’d do if an active shooter ever came into the building, and they said, ‘Hopefully someone will get to the office and yell ‘Lockdown!’ into the system.’ Even though that was the way it had always been done, it didn’t make sense.”

Launched just after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings that killed 26 in Newtown, Connecticut, in late 2012, Share911 has seen a slow but steady growth, but business doubled in the first 30 days after the shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School. (Full disclosure: I met Erik when he worked at NJSBA, before Share911 was developed. We have stayed in touch over the years and I decided to reach out to him about this topic while working on my feature story for this month’s issue.)

“We started this to solve a prob-

lem. I knew schools and how they operated,” Endress says. “Schools live in a bubble of control. Everyone has tried to solve the communication problems using disparate systems that weren’t connected. School safety drills don’t use realistic scenarios; in most of them, the principal calls you over the PA and says something is wrong. That’s never the way it happens.”

TURNING POINT

Brad Currie, the director of planning, research and evaluation for New Jersey’s Chester Public Schools, was Endress’ first customer in early 2013. Zazo came on board shortly thereafter.

Both Currie and Zazo say getting employees to use and understand how the app works is the toughest part, but once that learning curve is surmounted, the tool becomes indispensable.

“It’s really simplified communication in terms of sending out an alert for a drill or an actual situation that’s taking place,” says Currie, who oversees security for three schools that serve 1,000 elementary and middle school students. “We used to have different codes on pieces of paper, and now we have the ability to communicate with each other in a timely fashion with a few taps on the screen.”

Zazo says her district has used the app in actual situations “four or five times” over the past several years, and it has “worked really well.”

“It’s really hard to communicate in a way that keeps people calm, and to be able to send out messages every 3 to 5 minutes gives everyone a way to be informed about what is happening and what we’re doing,” she says. “Because people can get it even if they’re off site, and we’re linked to law enforcement, everyone is clear on what is actually occurring.”

As the technology continues to develop, Endress believes the Parkland shooting could be a turning point for school districts that need to embrace these types of programs.

“Sandy Hook was brutal and the failures there were quickly identified, but this was much worse. The number of failures in Parkland are absolutely jaw-dropping. Every school tells parents that the cops will be there and this will be taken care of within 30 seconds. What happened in Parkland was a total breakdown of all the things that schools told us would happen.”

Endress says he’s looking to expand the product to include a reunification program to help parents reunite with their children after a lockdown.

“These incidents take hours,” he says. “All people want to know is if their kid is OK. If you don’t know how to tell them, parents will charge the fences. What we have now allows us to communicate with staff, explain that we’re still in lockdown, and provide words that students can text to their parents. ‘Mom and dad, the school’s not in danger but we’re still in lockdown.’ The next step is finding a way to close that loop further.”



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