

New local school communication tool will spread info notifications quickly

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Holyoke School District is excited to unveil a new tool for communication called Blackboard Connect Notification System.

At the Feb. 16 Board of Education meeting, Elementary Principal Kyle Stumpf described the system that is being piloted in the local school district.

Seeking a way to notify parents quickly, Stumpf said he had narrowed the choices down to two companies when Supt. Bret Miles gave him information about Blackboard Connect.

Company reps came out to promote their system. Its capabilities put it at the front of the selections. Stumpf said Blackboard Connect wouldn't log down band width nor the phone company to send out 600 messages.

Being able to set up the system immediately was also a factor.

Funds were accumulated through the elementary building accountability committee's Boxtops for Education collection to purchase the use of Blackboard Connection through June 30. With unlimited K-12 students and staff in the set-up, the cost through June 30 is \$880.

Stumpf said the district is piloting the system this year, with the potential of sharing its success with other BOCES school districts. He added district technology coordinator Perry Ingram has done a lot of work with this.

For a school year, the cost would be around \$1,200-\$1,500, Stump estimated. It's based on a per-student figure.

With the click of one button, Blackboard Connect provides a parent notification system that sends out mass communication to home phones, cell phones, work numbers and text messaging numbers that have been programmed in.

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Stumpf said the system can also set up groups such as FBLA, fourth graders or track participants rather than sending to the whole school list.

This also lets the school district integrate with the current Edu-Star system for attendance and meal tracking.

Additionally, messages can be sent in English and Spanish. The system will translate what you put in English to Spanish. However, it's recommended that if it's a standard message such as "No school due to snow," that a staff person provide that translation in advance of its need.

The feedback is valuable. With each message, it tracks the number of lines that were answered by a live person, answered by voice mail, disconnected or failures to connect.

The program lists all contacts made and which ones failed. Personnel can look at the failed numbers to see if there were typos or misinformation in the contact number in the database.

Stumpf noted the intent to automatically update every night through the Student Information System.

Citing potential examples for Blackboard Connect, Stumpf and Miles noted a message could go out to the parents involved if a bus was delayed returning home.

A mass survey can also be sent to everyone, with a click of 1 meaning yes, 2 meaning no and 3 meaning there's not enough info to make a determination.

Stumpf said in training they recommend 35-40-second messages.

Personnel can choose exact times for messages to go out. And if there's no answering machine

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or voice mail on the receiving end of the call, Blackboard Connect will automatically call back three times every three minutes.

Part of the value of Blackboard Connect is increased efficiency. For example, it could alleviate written lunch reminders telling parents that lunch ticket funds are due.

It's valuable if for no other reason but for a crisis response plan, said Miles. "We're very excited to unveil it," he added.

Board self-reflects

With board self reflection being part of the new superintendent evaluation tool, board members Dan Kafka and Linda Jelden reviewed board commitments. The self reflection was approved as discussed.

Kafka noted a suggested change of philosophy from key deliverables to governance commitments. "We want to be more governance oriented, not specific as in micromanaging."

He added the intent is to use the self reflection piece "to help remind ourselves to what we're committed to do."

Jelden explained the strategy of some of the deliverables was focused on whether or not the goal was met.

"Governance commitments will make us look at how we met the goal," said Jelden. It allows questions such as: "Did our policies match the work? Did we use the communication

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principles?”

She added evaluation of the “how” will be a good way to evaluate the whole year.

Kafka asked if the board would be interested in considering board presence at some of the Chamber and community functions. “We need to participate in our partners’ activities,” said Jelden.

Another governance commitment is to maintain balance.

Jelden said she likes having something on paper. “This will really make us take a look at whether we’re moving toward our five-year goal.”

Kafka highlighted three specific ideas for governance commitments: to provide a more inviting meeting atmosphere, provide opportunities for staff and community input before making major decisions and to look at alternative venues for education.

He added the board is committed to the education of every student and will seek every venue to get there.

Board supports school finance litigation

Last week the local board endorsed and supported the Colorado school finance litigation known as Lobato v. State of Colorado by passing a resolution to that effect.

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This is an adequacy lawsuit which claims schools are not adequately funded.

With that, a financial contribution of \$580 was approved to assist in paying the litigation expenses. The funds will be managed and distributed by the Colorado Association of School Boards or a group it has organized.

The dollar figure of \$580 was derived from \$1 per funded pupil in the school district.

Administrator contracts approved

Supt. Bret Miles' contract with the school district was extended through June 30, 2012, as approved by the board last week.

Additionally, the board approved contracts for 2010-11 for Kyle Stumpf as Elementary Principal and Susan Ortner as JR/SR High Principal.

Other business

In other business at last week's meeting, the Re-1J board:

—hired Kathryn Jacoby as high school custodian.

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—approved five revised policies on second reading.

—held a work session after the regular meeting for 2010-11 budget discussion.