

Message system deemed successful

Written by Chris Lee

On Monday, March 8, a message was sent out to numerous phones and e-mail accounts all over the area. This message alerted parents, grandparents, students, teachers, bus drivers and anyone associated with the school district, there would be no school Thursday and Friday due to Holyoke boys' and girls' basketball teams qualifying for the class 2A state basketball tournament.

"We were really happy with it," Elementary Principal Kyle Stumpf said in regard to the first message being sent out using a new pilot program. Blackboard Connect Notification System is a communication tool being utilized within the school district.

The system can easily alert a large number of people in case of an emergency. The tool also is in place for situations such as what happened last week with state basketball. It can be used to alert different groups of students such as the high school track team as well.

Both Stumpf and Supt. Bret Miles said a message was developed around 2 p.m. last Monday and sent out via phone and e-mail at 5:30 p.m. Nearly 45 minutes later both Stumpf and Miles as well as High School Principal Susan Ortner and District Technology Coordinator Perry Ingram had all received data reports of the number of successful and unsuccessful messages that were sent out.

"It really got through to people," Miles said.

Of the English messages, 87 percent were received. There were 289 successful numbers and four bad numbers which Stumpf said were incorrect phone numbers or had been entered into the system incorrectly. He said this was the case with most of the "bad" numbers. A single digit had been entered incorrectly in these cases.

There were also 262 e-mail messages sent out in English.

On the Spanish side, 72 percent of the messages were received. There were 64 successful messages, six bad numbers and 18 no-answers. Twenty e-mail messages were sent out as well.

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The system automatically translates the e-mail messages into Spanish but Stumpf said they also had ESL instructor Yesenia Bencomo translate the message to see if they were translated differently. Stumpf said the two were very similar with minor differences, so in case of an emergency he said they feel confident the automatic translation would suffice. The automatic translation goes into great depth with translating the messages.

For the phone messages, Supt. Miles said they can get onto the system and record the message they want. There are options after a message is recorded to choose from to make sure the message is delivered correctly. They can choose exactly when the message will go out.

The message sent last Monday was sent at 5:30 p.m. with the hopes of catching the highest number of people. Miles added they had people stopping in the office the following day voicing their appreciation for the new tool.

For those parents or guardians who would like to update their contact information, Miles and Stumpf encourage them to contact either school and speak with the secretaries to get the necessary information updated. Multiple numbers may be added for each family to ensure the message will be received by everyone.

Both Stumpf and Miles said they are hoping to move forward with the system and incorporate an attendance and meal tracker as well as the small group function.

Stumpf said they have already set up the junior high and high school track teams as well as the high school baseball team. Track teams occasionally leave early in the morning and weather tends to cancel or postpone outdoor events. With this function, the school will be able to contact only those on the teams to alert them of any sudden changes.

Stumpf said they are able to access the system from anywhere with an internet connection or even a cell phone. This enables the administrators to get a message sent out even if they are not on school property.

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“For the first time we are very pleased,” Stumpf said. He mentioned they are in the process of going in and tweaking minor details and hope to see the success rate jump up to 95 percent. “It is a more efficient form of mass communication with the click of a button,” he added.

The system was presented at the Feb. 16 school board meeting by Stumpf. The district is piloting the program through June 30. The cost to use the system for an entire school year would be right around \$1,500, according to Miles.

“I see it as part of the district in the future,” Miles said. He also gave praise to the elementary building accountability committee for getting this project started. “I’m glad they made this pilot possible.”