Notification service is helping Michigan Schools earn high marks.

Whether notifying the community of a potential pandemic or weather-related closings, school districts are finding emergency notification systems key to timely, effective communication. Case in point: the state of Michigan, where more than 130 school districts are using Honeywell Instant Alert® for Schools.
Honeywell Instant Alert® for Schools is a Web-based notification service that allows school districts to broadcast messages to any device — from landlines and cell phones to e-mail and PDAs. Schools can send hundreds of thousands of phone calls and text messages in minutes, helping reach people no matter where they’re located. Three Michigan districts in particular have demonstrated how Instant Alert improves school-to-parent communication in almost any setting.

Diverse Needs
Located in a suburb of Detroit, the Inkster Public School District is made up of five schools and serves 5,100 students. While many students live in the Inkster area, 45 percent of the student body lives in urban Detroit, providing the district with a diverse student population. Consequently, the school district found that this diversity posed unique communication challenges.

"Internet and computer access are not readily available to all students at home," said Pete Lopez, technology director for the Inkster Public School District. "In some cases, families might not have a computer or television, so relying on media or district Web sites to relay information to parents wasn’t the most effective way to relay important messages. With Instant Alert, we are able to reach parents using whichever form of communication works best for them."

According to Lopez, in addition to varying student demographics, the location of the district also presented the need for an emergency notification system. When a toxic fire broke out at a chemical plant five miles from Inkster High School, district administrators knew a mass notification system was a necessity.

"If we would have had Instant Alert at the time of the chemical plant fire, we could have sent an alert letting parents know the school was available as shelter to those being evacuated from their homes due to toxic smoke in the area," Lopez said. "Or worst case scenario, if the fire would have spread closer to the school, we would not have had a way to communicate with parents quickly. Fortunately, the fire didn’t spread, but it was definitely a wake up call."

The Inkster Public School District now uses Instant Alert to communicate with parents for emergency and routine messages. Lopez is able to send an alert in less than 15 minutes, an improvement over the past, when it took nearly two hours to relay messages through the local media. The district is also able to create messages in advance, such as snow day alerts and late-start announcements, and store them online — a feature that helps schools respond quickly when seconds count.

Tight Budget, No Problem
Like schools across the country, educators in Michigan are struggling with tight budgets. While districts may have a distinct need for mass notification, finding the funds can be difficult if not impossible.

The Allegan Area Educational Service Agency (ESA) in Allegan, Mich., recognized this dilemma. The agency, which consists of eight local school districts and provides services to each district at a reduced cost, now offers the Honeywell Instant Alert system to all eight school districts at a price lower than what each district would pay on its own. This is made possible through state and federal funding, as well as by leveraging the buying power of several districts.

"An emergency notification system is just one of those technologies that schools shouldn’t live without," said Mark Dobias, ESA superintendent. "Not only is a district prepared to contact parents in the case of an emergency, but the service also improves daily communication. We can easily remind parents of things like upcoming conferences, school events and other information that may not have made it home in a student’s backpack."

All districts that purchase Instant Alert through ESA receive the same benefits they would if they purchased the system on their own, which allows the districts to take advantage of features like unlimited message delivery, sub-group creation (e.g., sports teams and grade levels) and alert scheduling. Additionally, since administrators are able to send information electronically, schools can cut traditional printing and mailing costs.
“We are able to offer Instant Alert at a reduced price, and help the ESA districts decrease paper and postage use, thereby reducing costs even more,” Dobias said. “In the end, districts save money while also increasing their communication efficiency.”

Break from the Norm

A recent situation at Breckenridge Community School District, another Instant Alert customer, further demonstrates the improved ease, speed and clarity of communications enabled by the service. The three-school, 900-student district frequently relied on Instant Alert for routine event reminders, and the occasional school delay or closure.

When the school received notice of an escaped prisoner from a nearby prison, the administration knew the situation would catch parents off guard. Parents needed to be alerted about the situation as quickly as possible with detailed information to reduce panic and ward off the rumor mill.

Breckenridge immediately sent a message to all school district parents letting them know the school went into a lockdown. By mid-afternoon, the school was still in lockdown and the escapee had not been found. School district administration knew this would present a problem for afternoon dismissal that was scheduled to occur in less than two hours.

Jeff Jennette, former superintendent of Breckenridge Community School District, sent another alert to parents, updating them on the situation and letting them know that buses would run as usual. Bus drivers, however, would need to see a visual cue from homes that it was okay to drop off the student. Jennette also notified parents that they would need to pick up students who typically walked home from school.

“Had we not used Instant Alert, there is no way we could have executed a successful dismissal plan this quickly,” Jennette said. “Even if we would have used traditional communication methods, such as the radio or television, parents would not have known to look for the information, so we wouldn’t have reached nearly as many people.”

According to Jennette, only one student did not have a ride home that afternoon. Every parent received the news and every child got home safely. The prisoner was caught at 11 p.m. that evening, allowing Breckenridge Community School District to return to normal activity the next day.

“By being proactive with our communication, we received fewer calls from concerned parents,” Jennette said. “Instant Alert allowed us to keep our eye on the situation and the safety of the children, rather than managing the phone lines.”

Not only are schools in Michigan taking advantage of Instant Alert for Schools, more than 3,000 schools across the country are using the system to notify parents, faculty and staff of emergency situations.

“We have become an efficient, fast-paced society and look to have information right away,” said Sean McNatt, current superintendent of Breckenridge Community School District. “If schools want to be successful, they must keep up with the outside environment and look for resources that will help them operate efficiently when budgets may be tight.”

Instant Alert for Schools allows administrators to send a message from any computer, in addition to launching an alert from the telephone if a computer is not nearby — an important feature during Michigan’s severe winter weather.

Michigan schools using Instant Alert are able to place parents, students and staff into unlimited communication groups such as bus routes, sports teams and grade levels, allowing targeted communications to only those who need the information.

Instant Alert can also be customized to each recipient by allowing parents and staff to enter contact devices and choose how they receive communication using an online portal.