

BEYOND NOTIFICATION

A CASE STUDY ON EFFECTIVE SCHOOL COMMUNICATIONS

Humble ISD is a suburban school district outside of Houston, TX. The district selected Relatrix' EZ-Communicator system to meet their need for emergency notification in 2008. They found that using the full range of functionality of this hosted Online Contact Center helped them go far beyond basic notification and more effectively communicate and engage their parents, staff and other community stakeholders.

SNAPSHOT OF A FAST-GROWING DISTRICT

Humble Independent School District (ISD), founded more than 100 years ago, is a popular choice among families moving to the Houston area due to the district's outstanding schools, variety of housing choices and prevalence of beautiful, natural landscapes. Humble ISD serves communities in northeast Harris County including Atascocita, Humble, Fall Creek, Kingwood, Summerwood, and more. Humble ISD operates five traditional high schools, eight middle schools, 26 elementary schools, an early college high school and several specialized campuses. Additional schools are planned for the future as the district works to keep pace with enrollment growth.

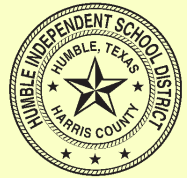
Today, almost 36,000 students are enrolled in the district with more than 5,000 employees. Humble ISD is nationally recognized for the outstanding education it offers to students. The district is listed among the 25 fastest growing school districts in Texas, currently one of the largest districts in the state. Humble ISD boasts outstanding honors in athletics, scholastic endeavors, and the arts.

Humble ISD implemented an online communications service called EZCommunicator in January 2008. The service was chosen to keep parents, staff and community members informed about news and information occurring in the district. Branded as *The Insider*, the EZCommunicator software from Relatrix Corporation, yields high results for Humble.



"The Insider helps Humble ISD meet multiple strategic goals. From improved attendance to greater community engagement with our schools, The Insider is a service we've come to rely upon. It provides us with multiple communications functions in one system; going well beyond basic notification. Overall, The Insider continues to be a sound investment for our district."

Dr. Guy Sconzo,
Superintendent
Humble ISD



Many factors influenced the district's decision to go with Relatrix. Among these were the cost-effective price, ability to notify parents in case of school district emergencies, and the option to provide users the flexibility to sign-up for interest groups keeping parents, community members and staff informed about news within the district.

"*The Insider* gives us the ability to send thousands of voice, email or text messages in a matter of minutes," said Karen Collier, Executive Director of Public Information at Humble ISD. "All campuses using *The Insider* system have access to tools that improve communications with parents for many purposes beyond just emergency notification. While emergency notification is our top priority, we're also excited about the added convenience of reaching our parents and community members easily and efficiently through the Internet, which they're coming to expect in today's fast-paced world," Collier added.

WHEN HURRICANE IKE CAME TO TOWN...



A variety of events, on and off campus, can affect schools. Gas leaks, power outages, police pursuits in the neighborhood, flooding, freezing rain and tornadoes are examples of scenarios that could prompt school officials to take special precautions. One such event was Hurricane Ike.

The Insider informed parents and staff members of the schedule to re-open schools. The outcome was the district re-opened with about 94% attendance, compared to average attendance of 96% - even though many families had evacuated to other parts of the country ahead of the hurricane.

"It's amazing how high our attendance numbers were considering that many homes were still without power and/or phone service," said Collier.

THE INSIDER MAKES AN IMPACT

The Insider allows the district and schools to notify parents via email, text, and telephone messages of alerts and important announcements relating to weather and other emergencies. Humble ISD also uses the system to send:

- a weekly newsletter to over 48,000 users in the database
- a monthly brief overview of board meetings
- notices about upcoming activities and other general announcements
- alerts and emergency communications including school closings, health issues, stranger danger, and more.

At the school level *The Insider* is used to remind parents of school events, to distribute school newsletters, to notify parents of student absences; most schools also send weekly notices as a collection of announcements in addition to the district's weekly update on all school recognitions and upcoming events. "I get so much more information from the school now about meetings and activities, plus I know right away if there is any problem at the campus," said one high school parent referring to his appreciation for *The Insider's* transparency. "The school notifies parents by email about absences so I can keep closer tabs on my son and so can the school. That is always a good thing," added another high school parent when asked if anything had changed as a result of implementing *The Insider*.



A middle school instructional support aide shared, "I can post things on the website, send email announcements to parents and post things on our marquee and still receive a, 'why wasn't I told . . . ?' When parents are called or get a text message, we know the message goes through. I have heard numerous parents comment about the text messages they receive about school closures, etc., for that reason alone the system is well worth it!"

One middle school insists *The Insider* increased parent attendance to school events. Atascocita Middle School attendance at its 2011 Spring Open House, after using the system for parent notification of the event, showed improved attendance of families, even though the student enrollment of that school decreased by 600 students.

LEVERAGING COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

The Insider has proven to be a valuable tool in keeping communications with parents streamlined and effective. All schools communicate with parents as a whole, setting up interest groups for various campus activities and much more. Campus newsletters or department news and information are digitally distributed, depending upon how groups are set for each campus. Most importantly, target audiences are reached with a single message by grade level, activity (such as by campus, booster groups, PTA, PTO, Spanish

speakers, parents of special needs students, etc.) or to anyone the school chooses to communicate.



Humble's internal and external communications with parents, community members and business partners mentions *The Insider* and the reasons why it adds value to the district. "The service also is listed on all the school websites, in every district newsletter and discussed during student orientations, parent-teacher conferences and events involving parents at the schools," said a middle school attendance specialist.

RUMOR CONTROL AT ITS BEST

One communication channel Humble ISD uses frequently is the Fact or Fiction service. Based on Relatrix' EZCommunicator knowledgebase, Fact or Fiction operates from the district website, allowing visitors to browse rumors by keyword and post rumors they hear for clarification. The system tracks rumors submitted online and directs community members and parents to the communications department where the response is crafted and posted online within one business day. The *Insider* response immediately updates the website when answered. Users subscribe to the Fact or Fiction category and receive notices or RSS Feeds when new rumors are answered.

"Fact or Fiction made a pretty big difference in digital communications for the district," said Collier. "Both parents, community and business partners could search the knowledgebase to see if their question had been answered or if what they were hearing was accurate," she added.

According to *The Insider* analytics, the number of views and question posts proved this tool served a high level of interest among the public and the parents. "With the 'Fact or Fiction' service of our *Insider* system Humble is able to respond quickly to rumors from our district patrons, and save staff time answering emails and phone calls," said Collier, "in the case of one particular rumor, which we encounter every school year, we were able to reduce the number of phone calls we received from 200 to less than 20. This saved staff and our schools hours of time, and ensured a consistent message. We also track the popularity of submitted rumors so we can plan future communications campaigns to our community."



"Humble ISD has been innovative in applying our knowledgebase module to help with rumor control," said Mark Franke, President of Relatrix. "Not only do they save time and money, but they effectively and efficiently deal with misinformation that can damage the district's reputation. It's a win for all stakeholders at the district," Franke added.

Experience at the district indicates parent and community feedback increased as a result of the Fact or Fiction module. Humble had as many as 25 to 30 questions posted per day during the H1N1 outbreak, bat concerns and threats of hurricanes. In addition to the Fact or Fiction site Humble ISD posts news and information to Twitter and Facebook. The system allows district officials to quickly send mass notifications to parents district-wide, by school or to a specific geographic area of the district.

KEEPING DATA SYNCHRONIZED

An unexpected benefit of the system has been the improvement of data quality as it relates to communication with parents. All schools using the system report that they are making regular corrections to eSchool data (the district's student information system) that was missing from student records such as parent email addresses, phone numbers and mailing addresses. Kingwood Park High staff notify parents who do not have a valid email address or contact number in the student database and correct that record accordingly. This improves the quality of the data, as registrars make corrections once a parent provides valid information.

Relatrix initially loaded existing contact records for Humble ISD parents. That step enabled the district to send notifications to parents based on which schools their children attend; however, Humble ISD decided to open access to the new *Insider* site to allow community members, media and others to sign-up for user accounts and choose their own interest groups to receive pertinent information about individual schools in addition to the district.

A "live" link between the eSchool database and the Relatrix database exists so that notifications will always be up-to-date with parent contact information as the school district's database is updated. Staff members were encouraged to log in and make sure their information was accurate as well. All users can elect to provide their cell phone numbers to receive text messages from district administrators during the school day, if needed, in the event of an emergency.



IMPROVING ATTENDANCE AND HUMBLE'S BOTTOM LINE

During the 2009-2010 academic year, Atascocita High School (AHS) began to use the system as an additional attendance tool. AHS piloted the Attendance Notification Service (ANS) in an effort to improve the school's average daily attendance. The program was successful, and in the fall of 2010-2011, all six Humble ISD high schools and four middle schools added the service. Positive outcomes emerged from the data collected.

AHS ran absence reports and notified parents whose students were not in school. This communication made a difference in the school's average daily attendance. Atascocita High saw these attendance increases:

- 1st six weeks increased from 2009 to 2010 by 1.80%
- 2nd six weeks increased from 2009 to 2010 by .82%
- 3rd six weeks increased from 2009 to 2010 by 1.35%

At \$28 per day per student, this additional service amounted to more than \$92,000 in Average Daily Attendance (ADA) funds from Fall 2009 to Fall 2010 at just one high school. This savings was achieved with 33% of the school's data missing email addresses for parents. In today's financial climate, even the smallest increase in ADA translates into much needed funds for Humble ISD.



Atascocita High School

The ANS has increased communication and feedback by both the school administration in charge of attendance and the parents who want to inform the district when a student will be absent. This two-way communication saved the district dollars on staff time and the schools on budget cuts. As one middle school attendance specialist reported,

"This system has not only changed and improved our attendance tracking procedures, but has also increased communication from our parents. We have found that the ANS has been instrumental in bridging the gap between parent, student and school accountability and reiterated the importance of student attendance. It is priceless."

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS + IMPROVED ENGAGEMENT = SUCCESS



The Insider, the Fact or Fiction module and the Attendance Notification Service showcased in this case study are all features of the EZCommunicator Online Contact Center from Relatrix. This hosted software created the opportunity for Humble ISD to expand and engage all of their school's communities and district's stakeholders. When an emergency or cancellation occurred, *The Insider* service quickly provided the information through email, text messages or phone calls to all users with the click of a button.

When parents, staff or community members were unsure about a rumor, Fact or Fiction provided information quickly, and added the missing details. Now all interested groups and individuals get accurate and timely information. As a result trust between the community and Humble ISD has noticeably increased. No one waits for the next edition of the local paper or believes all they hear on the street.

Humble has become the prime source of information for their community.

By working with their diverse stakeholders on a level that has become familiar to most everyone, Humble ISD goes far beyond basic notification. Through improved attendance Humble is even seeing a return on their investment in the *The Insider* system and service. This makes Humble ISD more effective in communicating and improves overall parent and community engagement at both the district and school level.



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