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Ardley schools signs on to new communication system

By **ALISON BERT**
THE JOURNAL NEWS
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A new e-mail system allows the Ardley school district to contact parents quickly in an emergency, sort e-mails according to parents' interests and save money by replacing expensive print mailings.

Through "The Ardley Blast," parents and community members can receive real-time e-mail notifications about school closings, early dismissals and impending disasters, along with school calendar updates, newsletters and other district news.

In the past month, Schools Superintendent Richard Maurer used it to notify parents of a snow delay and, as schools were about to close for Thanksgiving, an alert from the county Health Department about a student who had whooping cough.

By the end of the school year, he expects to use it as the district's main means of communication with parents and replace many of the print mailings, which are costly and often out-of-date by the time they are received.

In the future, parents may be able to use personal identification numbers to access their children's records and talk to teachers.

"It's a portal that offers huge possibilities," Maurer said.

The software — called Campaign Builder — tracks all e-mails, allowing the sender to know instantly which have been opened and which were not received. Messages are received almost instantly, even if they contain graphics, compared with typical e-mail lists that can have a lag time of 20 minutes or more. In addition, the sender can sort e-mails according to recipients' interests, such as the grade level of the recipient's children and their sports teams and extracurricular activities.

Gregory Bender, president of Message Logix Inc. in Rye, created Campaign Builder three years ago. It is used by publishers, legal and financial firms, and other businesses in New York, Connecticut and New Jersey.

But Bender says this is the first time a local school district is using this type of system — a claim backed up in a statement Message Logix solicited from Westchester County District Attorney Jeanine Pirro. In a November press release, Pirro said timely notification was "paramount to the safety of our children" and urged other districts to follow Ardley's lead.

Maurer said it's more efficient and reliable than regular e-mail.

In an emergency, it can take two hours for all parents to be notified through a phone chain, and sometimes the messages are inaccurate, he said. Although phone chains still will be used, parents can now receive notification instantly along with Web links to more information.

He expects the plan's annual cost of \$6,000 to be offset by the savings of reduced mailings, which now cost more than \$10,000 a year.

Because the e-mail list can be easily sorted, parents get concise messages about only the

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"One thing we always hear from parents — they want more communication from the school," he said. "For years and years, I think schools interpreted that as sending out more newsletters or sending out more information. But really what we heard from parents is, they don't want more. They want faster, more reliable and highly specific information. They don't want to get the junk mail from the school district like they get from everyone else."

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So far, 1,800 parents have signed up for the service.

"I hope this is just the beginning," said PTA President Jodi Siegel, a mother of two elementary school children.

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She said it is much easier to find out about snow closings. In past years, she would wait up to 20 minutes until her district's name scrolled by during the local news, or she would try to get through to the district's recorded phone message along with 1,000 other parents. But this month, when the district opened two hours late, Siegel received the message by checking her e-mail long before it was time to leave for work.

In the future, she hopes teachers will use the system to communicate with parents and post assignments.

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