

## Case Study: Bellingham School District

### Optimizing Communications with Families and Staff

*A two-person team at the Bellingham School District uses the PIER (Public Information and Emergency Response) System to manage an impressive communications program for parents, staff and other community stakeholders. At the same time, the system acts as a crisis communications center that can be activated to communicate with parents, emergency response teams, key personnel, and the media.*



*Tanya Rowe  
Communications Director,  
Bellingham School District*

#### Overview

##### Customer Profile

The Bellingham School District covers 97 square miles and has 73,000 residents. Over 10,000 students are enrolled in 21 schools.

##### Business Situation

A wide variety of communications must occur to multiple audiences for day-to-day operations and for crisis preparation.

##### Solution

Bellingham School District established a PIER Communications Control Center to manage both daily and crisis communications. Using the system, a staff of just two people now communicates with greater speed and control.

##### Key Benefits

- Web based and secure
- Multiple distribution channels
- No software
- Timely responses to stakeholder questions
- Successful community relations

#### Customer Profile

The largest of seven school districts in Whatcom County, Washington, the Bellingham School District covers 97 square miles and has 73,000 residents. Over 10,000 students are enrolled in 21 schools. There are approximately 700 professional educators and over 500 support staff employees. The District has many audiences for a wide variety of communications from day-to-day operations to urgent and crisis events.

#### Business Situation

In every school district, a wide variety of communications must occur, from notifying parents of important school events and snow closures to the routine publishing of lunch menus. Typically there is far more to communicate than there is staff to handle the job, often resulting in the familiar question, "Why weren't we told about this?"

Consider the following events that could lead to more severe problems in the face of poor communications:

- A bomb scare occurs at a high school, resulting in early dismissal of over 1,200 students. Because of their high mobility, students arrive home and "official" news of the event doesn't reach parents. Worse, in the time it takes to formulate the official statement and determine how to get the word out, speculation and rumors spread rapidly. Different versions of the event are shared by different students, and the media begin reporting erroneous information. A barrage of desperate calls from panicked parents and the media overwhelms the staff.
- Administrators must make a decision about a snow day. Weather forecasts are reviewed and the transportation department is consulted about road conditions. Timing is everything.

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The word must get out in time for parents to make childcare decisions, and for teachers and staff to know if they need to report to work. Typically, administrators have a window of 30 minutes or less for contacting TV and radio stations, and for getting information posted to the District's web site.

- A life-threatening event: A truck transporting hazardous chemicals crashes in front of an elementary school. School is in session when police notify District officials and request that the school lockdown and provide shelter in place to avoid exposure. Word spreads among the community; parents begin to arrive at the school only to be told to wait at a safe distance. Media calls pour into District offices while local officials clean up the spill.

There is a clear need for effective communication during a crisis. But as most Districts face tight staffing constraints for "normal" communications, even a small crisis event can quickly overload available resources.

*"Without a system like PIER, I would never be able to manage this much information so efficiently for our many audiences. It allows me to create, collaborate and communicate much faster."  
- Tanya Rowe*

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## The Communications System

Bellingham School District established a PIER Communications Control Center to manage both daily and crisis communications. Using the system, a staff of just two people now communicates with greater speed and control.

PIER integrates several major elements into a cohesive, web-based system. Functions such as contact management, content authoring & collaboration, approval policies, information distribution (via web, email, fax and telephone), as well as inquiries and responses, can all be managed within the PIER System. There is no support required from the District's IT department.

Tanya Rowe is Communications Director for the District. With help from her assistant, she uses PIER to manage a remarkable array of communications programs:

- Frequent news releases about District programs and activities, simultaneously posted to the District's web site and either emailed or faxed to key media (and other) contacts.
- A news center where parents, staff and the media can go for late-breaking information, from weather-related schedule changes to emergency communications.
- A photo center (for media) with downloadable, high-resolution images of all key District personnel and staff in the news.
- A weekly newsletter directed to District staff that includes news about both internal events and relevant community developments.
- Customized news feed for parents and other community stakeholders where they can self-subscribe to specific information such as news releases, lunch menus and weather advisories.

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- Periodic surveys for students, staff, families and the community, where feedback about District performance and academic focus is solicited, collected and automatically tabulated.

These day-to-day forms of communication also sharpen the District's readiness to respond in an emergency; "I would never have a crisis communications system I didn't use every day," Rowe says. "Unless you're using it all the time, you're not going to be ready in an emergency."

Behind the "public" information programs, Ms. Rowe maintains a secure-access website for crisis responders such as police and fire departments. On this site, emergency responders have access to maps pinpointing each school, as well as comprehensive floor plans and evacuation routes to guide responders in times of crisis. Key District contacts are also listed on the site, including cell numbers to be used in an emergency.

### Key Benefits

The fact that PIER is web-based and secure is critical during an emergency. Responders, key executives and other critical staff can access the system at any hour from anywhere in the world, even if the District's own IT infrastructure has been compromised. Secure "chat" and "conference" channels allow communicators to collaborate online about what information should be released, dramatically accelerating the ability to convey important information.

Information can be communicated via website, email, fax and even telephone with a few clicks of a mouse. Notes Rowe, "PIER is ready to reach hundreds of parents by telephone in a major emergency and relay information about the incident, what to do, and where to go for current information."

Early in 2005, the District used PIER to alert parents and teachers about snow closures. More than 160,000 hits were recorded on the PIER site as people checked for continuing updates.

Contact PIER Systems, Inc.

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There was no software or hardware to install to implement PIER, and no IT support was required. PIER Systems, Inc. worked directly with the Bellingham School District staff to design and populate their PIER center, and provided key user training and ongoing support.