



# SELECTING AN EMERGENCY MASS NOTIFICATION SYSTEM

By Jamie Underwood

The Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting that took place in December 2012 left the public reeling and school district superintendents scrambling. How can we prevent something like this from happening again? Are our school buildings secure enough? How do we ensure everyone’s safety in any emergency situation?

School shootings like those that took place at Sandy Hook and Virginia Tech have spurred an ever-growing conversation about how to manage active shooter scenarios. These events have also encouraged a much broader discussion about how to reach all individuals across multiple facilities or areas in the event of any type of emergency.

School districts throughout the country are facing tough questions about how to secure their schools and protect students, faculty and staff. In response, numerous solutions are popping up that promise to fill gaps in notification coverage. So what is the best course of action, and what do school districts need to know when researching emergency mass notification systems?

## Comprehensive Notification Coverage

In many situations such as on-campus shootings, time is of the essence. According to a recently released FBI study on active shooter incidents in the U.S., 60 percent of active shooter scenarios ended before police arrived. This means that notification coverage and timeliness are crucial when it comes to getting an emergency alert out to individuals, and it is important for schools to consider a comprehensive emergency notification

system (ENS) that can reach all students, faculty, and staff both quickly and easily.

Comprehensive notification coverage generally requires a variety of alerting methods to overcome obstacles that may prevent individuals from receiving an emergency alert. Where are people located when the emergency occurs? Do they have access to a computer or mobile device — and is it powered on? Are they in an area where they can see or hear the alert? All of these are potential obstacles that can prevent individuals from receiving an emergency alert.

For example, SMS alerting, which sends an emergency message via text and phone, is one option, but that alone is not necessarily sufficient. Users must first opt in to the alerting service; opt-in rates for these types of apps are historically low. In addition, recipients must have their phones on and check them regularly for SMS alerting to be effective. Similarly, emergency alerts that are broadcast over speakers are only effective if an individual is within hearing distance. For these reasons, being mindful of a system’s limitations is important; the answer is to adopt a system that provides overlapping coverage through multiple communication channels for sending and receiving an emergency alert.

Ensuring that individuals are alerted to the fact that there is an emergency is important. But taking this concept one step further, how do you provide specific information and instructions to personnel, staff, or visitors across multiple facilities? Sounding a warning tone gets

people’s attention, but it does not convey information about the emergency at hand. It is important to consider an emergency notification system that does both—sounds emergency tones/visible strobes and displays or speaks an emergency message that notifies individuals of the emergency and appropriate steps to ensure safety.

Finally, emergency mass notification system needs vary across organizations and locations. While most schools districts are prompted to begin researching ENSs due to their concerns over on-campus shootings, many find that they actually use the system for something specific like weather-related alerts, whether it involves a tornado warning, wildfire threat or inclement weather. As a result, the selection criteria can change drastically depending on the school. Mass notification systems range from simple to elaborate, and it’s easy to fixate on specific services or products when reviewing the different offerings. Keep the big picture in mind, and always come back to your end goal. What are your specific needs, and what is your school looking to achieve with its emergency mass notification system?

## Integration

Whether schools have an emergency notification system in place and are looking to expand or are considering longer-term future additions, being mindful of the system’s ability to integrate is essential. If your institution already has one or more products or systems in place, it’s crucial that the new system work well with those components, not only for cost effectiveness

but to ensure a cohesive system overall. Schools may already have a PA system in place or other assets — such as LED marquees, TVs, or computers — that can be leveraged as part of an ENS. Be sure to keep this in mind when evaluating the different notification systems that are available.

Even if you're looking to implement a system for the first time, think long term. Schools often choose to expand the system at some point in the future, whether it is with the same vendor or not. Look for a system that integrates easily with other products and ENSs. Not considering the integration factor can cause problems down the road as you look to build out or add on to different system components.

### Code Compliance

Finally, be mindful of important mass notification codes and mandates when selecting an emergency notification system.

- The Americans with Disabilities Act specifies that local government

emergency preparedness and response programs be accessible to people with disabilities, including emergency mass notification and access to information. Consider products or systems that are not purely sound based.

- The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) reauthorizes the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) and mandates under federal statutes that universities and colleges issue emergency warnings. The HEOA further establishes requirements for timely warning and emergency notification.
- In addition to its core focus on fire alarm systems, the National Fire Alarm and Signaling Code (NFPA 72) includes requirements for mass notification systems used for weather emergencies; terrorist events; biological, chemical and nuclear emergencies; and other threats.
- According to Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, Federal agencies

must give disabled employees and members of the public access to information that is comparable to the access available to others.

- U.S. Department of Defense initiated Unified Facilities Criteria (UFC) requirements include providing real time information to all building occupants or personnel in the immediate vicinity of a building during emergency situations.

Ultimately ENSs provide a feeling of safety and security. Every school hopes it will never have to launch an emergency alert, but it is important to have an emergency notification system and set of protocols in place should an event take place. Emergency preparedness is the first step, and ENSs help schools reach that goal.

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