

## Schools Stay Connected to Stay Secure

*By Michael Zuidema, Communications Manager, Code Blue*

There's no question that social media outlets – keep in mind that we're mostly talking about Facebook and Twitter here – are the bane of many instructors' classes.

Even if social networking sites continue to be a distraction to other students, assist cheaters and simply serve as a rude annoyance, the harsh reality is that their popularity doesn't appear to be waning anytime soon. According to an Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry study, more than 60 percent of 13 to 17 year olds have at least one profile on a social networking site, where they spend an average of more than two hours per day. Plus, Consumer Reports discovered that 7.5 million users are under Facebook's minimum age requirement of 13 because parents have helped create their children's account by lying about the age associated with it.

In fact, the real anomaly these days is finding the student — honor roll or otherwise — without a Facebook account or Twitter feed. The good news is all of those "likes" and "tweets" one day could prove beneficial during an emergency situation.

Unfortunately, as a multitude of headlines over the past decade have taught us, schools are not immune to tragic events. Whether it's an active shooter or a natural disaster, it's vital to have an up-to-date emergency plan in place and more and more institutions are realizing the importance of adopting a multi-layered solution.

And that means embracing the potential of social media.

That only makes sense when about 70 percent of students use up to three mobile devices a day, and half of those say they check these devices every 10 minutes – even if it may seem frequent. Simply put, the more kids that have a mobile device, the more they will be checking social media.

Many schools include some sort of public address system in their construction blueprint, and that certainly remains an effective means of communication. But that doesn't guarantee the proper intelligibility to ensure important alerts are being heard or even understood. Intelligibility is a key component of NFPA 72 regulations, which includes outlines for the requirements needed for public address systems. If even one individual can't make out an emergency notification, then it's not a complete answer. That's why it's important to consider adopting additional means of communication, like emergency speakerphones, digital signs, fire panels, desktop alerts email, text messaging and, yes, social media, via a mass notification system.

One report claims that one in five disaster survivors use social media to contact first responders, and 44 percent of that group uses Facebook to make the connection. Additionally, four out of five Americans expect emergency response agencies to monitor and respond to social media platforms. While that may not guarantee anyone's safety, it generally can provide valuable information to safety personnel, families, friends and more.

The City of Los Angeles has used Twitter for years to disseminate information about fires, traffic accidents and even looking for leads in cold cases. During the 2013 Boston Marathon tragedy, traffic on the police department's Twitter account skyrocketed as more and more people searched for the most-recent updates.

Even if something as horrific as spotting an active shooter on campus or dealing with catastrophic weather may not be a common occurrence, taking the proper steps to ensure everyone is prepared is an obvious necessity. Emergency situations happen in the blink of an eye and

tions happen in the blink of an eye and when time matters most it's critical to be sure crucial seconds aren't wasted trying to figure out what to do, where to go and who's in charge.

By implementing an efficient and easy-to-use mass notification plan – one that understands just how important social media is – the right safety steps can be taken with as broad an audience as possible.

For example, before a tornado strikes weather and safety alerts can be delivered, or during a building lockdown warnings can be relayed to students, faculty and staff to avoid the area. And anytime during an emergency incident, individuals will have a way to communicate with the outside.

It's easy to assume that a common emergency communication solution like public address speakers will be sufficient enough to guarantee a wide safety net, but with more and more people becoming conditioned to regularly check social media sites it just makes sense to cover all the bases.

Some teachers and administrators may never learn to accept Facebook and Twitter in the classroom setting. But embracing the potential of those very sites could be imperative when it comes to the safety of students, teachers, administrators, staff, visitors, etc.

And isn't school safety something everyone can "like?"

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