



FirstNet for Student Safety

Faster, Smarter and Safer Solutions for K-12 Schools

Dan Stebbins shares the details of a story that no one should have to tell. On Dec. 14, 2012, a lone shooter opened fire at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Stebbins, who was the Connecticut State Police Colonel and on-scene commanding officer that day, recounts how the school's communication system proved to be a weak link. Though the school's safety plan was executed, it wasn't enough to prevent or minimize the loss. The school secretary called 911 but had to hang up before relaying important details because her landline phone didn't reach far enough for her to hide from the shooter.

Instead of issuing safety instructions, the PA system blared gunshots echoing off school walls and hallways, making it difficult for first responders to determine where shots were coming from and how many shooters there were. Teachers

and other staff didn't know what was happening and had no way to communicate with anyone.

Stebbins' recount sheds light on the importance of communication in an emergency situation and the need for FirstNet — the only nationwide, high-speed, broadband network designed specifically for public safety, including school resource officers and campus police.

Seconds Matter in an Emergency

"Many schools rely on mobile devices and landline networks to communicate with public safety officials during a crisis, but congestion presents a significant challenge," says Stebbins.

During an emergency, high call volume can overwhelm a 911 network, and the most important calls may not make it through in the critical moments an incident is occurring. The issue of

interoperability further compounds communication challenges.

As AT&T's Lee Ballentine, FirstNet Area Manager, explains, "When there is a school emergency, everyone shows up, but when they get there, they can't talk to each other."

Making Emergency Communications a Priority

With FirstNet, first responders and school officials receive priority access to the network and the ability to preempt commercial users. Texas City Independent School District (ISD) has been a leader in implementing FirstNet to help ensure immediate access to first responders and school officials in the face of a critical incident.

"When communication breaks down, the plan fails. If you can't communicate, you can't activate your plan and have people where you need them," says

Dr. Rodney Cavness, Superintendent, Texas City ISD. “FirstNet has been instrumental in us developing and implementing what we believe is a gold standard of school safety and security.”

Using FirstNet, first responders and school safety officials in districts such as Texas City ISD can use push-to-talk applications to communicate and share real-time data — including pictures, videos and text — improving situational awareness, decision-making and response time. With FirstNet’s integrated dispatch capabilities, personnel from other critical agencies can automatically join the appropriate communications subgroup and coordinate their response — either one-to-one or one-to-many.

Making Transportation Part of the School Safety Plan

Another important component of FirstNet is its capabilities for transportation fleets — including push-to-talk, GPS tracking and RFID tracking. School districts across the country are adopting FirstNet to create a reliable channel for emergency communications aboard school buses, as well as a smart ecosystem for day-to-day operations.

Shelby County Schools in Alabama is one such district. With 318 bus routes spread across 810 square miles, and approximately 11,000 students riding the district’s buses daily, reliable communications had been a challenge.

“The previous communication system was outdated and inadequate. We have a lot of hills, valleys and trees, so we had a lot of dead spots. If there was an emergency, the drivers had no way to contact us,” explains Brent Copes, Transportation Supervisor for Shelby County Schools.

The district now uses FirstNet with push-to-talk capabilities for bus drivers, as well as a mix of voice and data features that school leaders and personnel can use on their smartphones.

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Dr. Rodney Cavness, Superintendent, Texas City ISD

“We chose FirstNet, because it had the best coverage. We tested it in every part of the county, as well as in closets and buildings across our campuses,” says Copes.

If there’s an emergency on the bus or a vehicle breaks down, Copes can pull up the integrated dispatch tool and the GPS data on a smartphone. He doesn’t have to call drivers to ask them exactly where they are, which is especially valuable if there’s a substitute driver who is unfamiliar with the route.

“I know where the bus is located and can even see where the closest mechanic is so that we can get to the bus and those students quickly,” he says.

If extreme weather, accidents, or other road conditions create transportation issues, Copes can use FirstNet’s integrated dispatch and communications subgroups to notify drivers in zones that have been impacted. Copes can also look back at bus routes from the previous day and see where the district can eliminate redundancies.

“It has saved us money by allowing us to consolidate routes and use that bus in another part of the county that needs it,” says Copes.

Getting on Board

As public safety technologies such as classroom panic buttons and RFID tracking gain a foothold, commercial wireless networks could become even more congested, and prioritizing critical communications will be even more important. With the ever

present dangers of school shootings, natural disasters, industrial accidents and other high-impact events, school districts recognize the time is now to implement solutions that help ensure reliable communication and collaboration across all responders.

When asked what school districts should consider when adopting a network-based communications solution for school safety, Copes recommends testing the network’s coverage in all geographic areas as well as in all buildings. He also suggests asking for a demonstration of features such as integrated dispatch.

Another important step is developing a strong relationship between the district and public safety officials.

“Ensure there is a solid partnership, from the school district administrator level, with the community’s police and fire chiefs. Make sure there is an open dialogue and each party knows they can evolve together to improve and prioritize things,” recommends AT&T’s Mike Newburn, FirstNet Advanced Solutions Team.

With steps like these and a solution like FirstNet, districts have a path forward to help avert tragedy, allay fears and safeguard student safety.



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