The 9 Critical Roles Unified Communications Plays in School Crisis Situations

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Communications are a major component of crisis preparedness for schools. IT directors at colleges and other educational institutions are responsible for helping plan for emergencies that can impact students, families, and staff. The US Office of Justice Programs recommends that organizations have a specific model for response to the four main categories of crisis, which they define as follows:

- The death of a student, staff member, or community member.
- Major environmental crisis, such as a flood, earthquake, or fire.
- Threats to the physical safety of students even in the absence of injuries, such as a school bus accident.
- Threats to the emotional well-being of students, such as repeated bomb threats or hate-crime graffiti.

With any of these four categories of crisis, the IT team and staff members will be required to immediately begin communicating internally and externally. Your model for crisis response may include guidelines for each of the following crisis requirements:

- Notifying crisis team members
- Notifying school staff
- Communicating with students and families
- Interacting with the community and media

Depending on the type of threat you're facing, the ability to move information efficiently throughout the campus can be critical to student and staff safety.

Why UCaaS Matters in Worst-Case Scenarios

Adequate communications tools are necessary to protect the physical and emotional well-being of your school community. Having the right tools in place is critical. Can your tools stand up to a natural disaster, and still allow you to notify your staff and emergency personnel?

Unified business communications as a service (UCaaS) can offer significant advantages over publicly-switched

telephone networks in worst-case scenarios. Your organization can communicate more efficiently, achieve flexibility, and appreciate superior disaster-proofing. To learn nine ways UCaaS is on your side during a school crisis situation, read on.

For insight on the day-to-day benefits of IP-based telephony and other UCaaS tools for schools, we recommend [What are the Best Phone Systems for Schools in 2017?]

1. e911

In many crises, the first step to protecting students and staff is to notify 911 that you're in a state of emergency. With PSTN phones, this isn't always possible. Public telephone networks can suffer outages or service unavailability during a natural disaster. If a staff member needs to use their mobile phone to place the call, their mobile device may not accurately relay location information to emergency dispatch.

UC providers offer e911 services as a federally-required component of VoIP service. This involves the registration of your softphone numbers to provide location and caller identification to dispatch. VoIP mobility supports your need for e911 service, even if a staff member places the call via their VoIP mobile app.

2. Mobility

VoIP mobility is the integration of softphones and VoIP mobile apps to allow users to be reached by the same phone number on-site or off-site. This offers advantages in communicating location information with 911 dispatch. However, it can also make it easier to communicate with staff and your crisis communications team when every second matters. With a single phone number assigned to each staff member, you can disseminate messages much more quickly.

3. Audio Alert System Integration

If your crisis response requires you to quickly broadcast information throughout the campus, UC can offer phone-based intercom support for authorized staff members. This can allow your crisis management team to broadcast instructions quickly to each classroom through their VoIP app. If your school, like many others, has a legacy PA system it's important to find a UCaaS vendor who can support integration with your existing system.

4. Temporary Crisis Communications Phone Lines

Your school may need to quickly create a dedicated phone number for communicating with family and community members. The line may be staffed by a member of the crisis team, or it could contain a recorded voice message answering FAQ about the emergency. UC enables your IT staff to add a phone line in minutes. All it takes to stand up a crisis line is a few simple changes in your administrative portal and connecting a handset to your internet connectivity.

5. Flexible Call Routing

In some cases, your organization may need to dedicate numerous staff members to answering support phone calls as you navigate crisis communications with your student's families. UC can support flexible and sophisticated call routing options, which can be managed easily through your administrative portal.

6. Disaster-Proof Data Backups

What happens if your organization loses its data during the crisis? It's a possibility for institutions who suffer a natural disaster like major flooding or fall prey to a serious information crime. A loss of data archives can cause a host of issues ranging from non-compliance, to lost student records, and lesson plans.

With UC, your school can access cloud backup solutions to ensure your data is safe in the cloud, even if your on-site servers and hardware are severely compromised. In the rare instance you suffer from a severe, regional natural disaster, your UC vendor should support your need for business continuity with remote backups at multiple locations nationwide.

7. Fiber-Optic Internet Reliability

Many of your school's communication channels are already internet-based, even if you've yet to adopt unified communication tools. If you lose connectivity to the internet, due to acts of vandalism or inclement weather, how will that affect your ability to move information in a crisis?

Fiber-optic internet connectivity is far tougher than traditional, copper cable-based internet. It's resistant to extreme weather, carries superior information security, and it's not susceptible to electromagnetic interference. The only way to disrupt a fiber connection is to physically cut the fibers.

Even more importantly, a UCaaS vendor with their own fiber service can offer reliability guarantees that public internet vendors can't. Sharing your bandwidth with consumer-class customers can be a risk, especially if your public internet vendor's capacity is at a premium during a regional disaster. By partnering with a UCaaS provider that offers both fiber-optic internet connectivity and a full range of cloud-based communication tools, you can ensure your internet connection doesn't go down when you need it most.

8. Call Trace

Receiving a threatening phone call is a very frightening and real risk to schools. While call trace is not always a common UCaaS feature, it's an important one to consider when evaluating your UC options. This feature gives you the ability to mark a call as an emergency if you're ever dealing with a bomb threat, suicide threat, or other significant risks via an incoming call.

9. SMS Integration

Some leading UC solutions offer a unified inbox for communications, including voicemails transcribed into texts, faxes, internal messaging platforms, and SMS (text) messages. With high-quality VoIP apps for your employee's mobile devices, you can gain the ability to quickly disseminate information to some or all of your staff members when a crisis is underway.

Selecting the Right UC Vendor for Your School's Crisis Planning Needs

An adequate response to crisis requires staff members at a school to communicate quickly, and take appropriate action. If your communication tools are susceptible to going down during a disaster or involve sharing bandwidth, you may not be able to get the message across in time to protect your students and community members.

For school IT directors considering unified communications as a service, selecting a vendor with disaster recovery planning experience in the education sector is crucial. Look beyond the features you need to evaluate their knowledge and commitment. Ideally, a vendor should be able to show you a clear plan for crisis-proofing your institution with storyboarding, and provide references from other school IT leaders.

Founded in 1995, Atlantech Online was one of the earliest players in the Internet Service Provider Industry. 31 years later, they're a leading provider of best-of-class unified communications solutions to clients in the education sector and other highly-regulated industries with a need for solid business continuity. We offer data centers with a dark fiber backbone and 4 Tbps DWDM equipment, class 5 voices switch, direct cloud connect, and countless other UCaaS services. For a no-obligation price quote, click here to speak to an expert representative.

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