

St. Charles (La.) Parish Public School District

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| Superintendent | Dr. Rodney Lafon |
| Key Communications Personnel | Rochelle Cancienne, director, public information |
| District Profile | This 10,000-student district has 18 schools and 1,700 staff members. Based in a rural community, St. Charles Parish includes some Fortune 500 companies, but also has pockets of low wealth. Forty-five percent of its students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. The district budget is \$79 million. |
| Natural Disaster that Impacted the District | Hurricane Katrina |

Hurricane Katrina hit St. Charles Parish on Aug. 29, and schools remained closed for 12 days. The district sustained more than \$5 million of damage, including destroyed portables, roofs blown from buildings, gymnasium and stage floors destroyed by water and broken windows. The district lost all power and its typical vehicles of communication with all stakeholders. Between 850 and 900 students that were displaced from other school systems are now being educated in St. Charles Parish.



Communication Story

The use of innovative technology, participation in an area-wide emergency preparedness committee, cooperation with various agencies, and a lot of hard work helped the St. Charles Parish Public School District rebound from Hurricane Katrina and earn accolades from staff, parents and community members.

The Parish maintains an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) team through its Office of Emergency Preparedness, and that team includes representatives of numerous governmental agencies, including the school system. Rochelle Cancienne is one of the schools' representatives, and demonstrated communications know-how during the hurricane recovery that established her school district as a community leader.

While the district had long-term relationships with the news media, part of its strategic communication plan called for development of a communication system that could deliver messages directly to staff and parents in the event of a hurricane when these individuals might be scattered throughout several states.

“As the largest employer in St. Charles Parish, our decision if and when to close schools due to a hurricane has tremendous impact on parents who are trying to determine their action when a voluntary/mandatory evacuation order is issued,” Cancienne explained. “Even more important to us was having a way to communicate with parents and staff when schools were to re-open since many of our stakeholders may have evacuated to the homes of relatives or friends several states away from us.”

During the NSPRA Seminar in 2004, she became acquainted with Connect-ED, a telephone system which allows messages to be automatically sent. This technology turned out to be a key for reaching parents and staff. Once obtaining the system, the district, in a two-week period, collected data on the parents of its 10,000 students and inserted that information into the system, within 24 hours before the mandatory evacuation order was called.

Another key for the school system was its involvement in the Parish's EOC team. Whenever a hurricane appears in the Gulf or another emergency could be anticipated, the team comes together to plan strategies. Cancienne attended the 10 a.m. EOC meeting the Friday before Katrina hit and all indicators showed that

St. Charles Parish would not be severely impacted as the hurricane was headed to the Florida panhandle. Six hours later St. Charles' future changed dramatically as the hurricane jumped 150 nautical miles and the Parish was now in the middle of the storm's cone. Looking for the best way to reach large numbers of school system stakeholders quickly, Cancienne turned to Friday night football games where the district made announcements to all attending encouraging them to stay tuned to local TV stations for current information.

The next EOC meeting was scheduled for 7 a.m. Saturday, but when Cancienne's phone rang at 5 a.m., she knew the news would not be good. A mandatory evacuation would be called at 9 that morning. After conferring with the superintendent and executive staff, she drafted a message for the new emergency phone system indicating schools would be closed and people would be informed when they re-opened via this system. When the evacuation announcement was made, with one press of a button, the school system's message was sent to 31,000 phone numbers with a 98 percent success rate.

By Monday, St. Charles was a ghost town as four school system representatives toured the community to assess damage. Through her involvement with the EOC, Cancienne learned of the big picture — that the Parish was basically without power, sewers and water. While she wanted to keep stakeholders informed of current information, she also had limited ways to communicate as landlines, cell phones and satellite phones were all useless.

She used Connect-ED to alert stakeholders about current conditions, and that information turned out to be the only such communication from any governmental agency in the Parish. As the days passed, Cancienne and communicators from other agencies provided morning updates on radio station WWL which reached 11 states. They also traveled to Baton Rouge every other evening, as part of 15-hour work days, to be interviewed by WWL-TV for its live newscast.

As conditions stabilized, the next communication challenge was developing a plan to first re-

open schools and then to accept students who were displaced from other areas. A three-phase plan was developed and communicated as to (1) when St. Charles Parish students should report back to school, (2) when students living in St. Charles Parish but attending other schools could enroll, and (3) when students from outside the Parish could register. St. Charles Parish Public Schools served an additional 850-900 displaced youngsters after the hurricane.

But the St. Charles communications story wasn't yet complete. Superintendent Lafon was invited to testify before Congress regarding the costs of the hurricane on Sept. 22. While that initially appeared to be an opportunity for the school system, it soon turned into another communications challenge. During the trip to Washington, Hurricane Rita developed and appeared to possibly impact St. Charles. Again, the telephone technology proved to be a communications savior as Cancienne was able to send a message outside the testimony room to stakeholders in the Parish alerting them that schools would be closed.



Result/Outcomes

While St. Charles plans to conduct a formal evaluation of its communication efforts this spring, there is already evidence that its efforts played a major role in helping the community recover.

Many rumors sprang up in the minds of St. Charles residents as they watched network television from homes of relatives and friends away from Louisiana. They heard about extensive looting, rapes and other crimes committed by people who came to the crisis site.

“We were able to dispel many of these rumors through our communications,” Cancienne said. “We had the sheriff appear on television to calm St. Charles residents, and when schools re-opened the footage of school buses had a reassuring impact. Corporate leaders indicated our communications helped them encourage workers to return, and the school system was seen as a catalyst for normalcy.”



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