

How THUS Phone Service Improves Pupil Safety

No More Busy Signals On Scottish Schools' Vital Helplines

Thanks to the warming effects of the Gulf Stream, some parts of Scotland have some of the best summer weather that there is to be had in the United Kingdom. Unfortunately some parts of Scotland also experience some of the worst winter weather imaginable in the UK. In rural areas of Scotland this can cause major problems for the operators of day-to-day transportation systems. And where that transportation involves children being taken to and from their schools by bus, parents understandably become very concerned about the safety of their children.

What Was

In the past, if the weather deteriorated during the school day, the parents of children who use buses would inundate Scottish schools with telephone calls requesting updated information on the status of current travel arrangements. Unfortunately the telephone systems serving these schools generally could not cope with very large volumes of incoming calls. On occasions, overloaded school telephone systems prevented urgent calls being made to and from the school bus companies themselves, and blocked calls from the schools to the Meteorological Office for weather information.

THUS To The Rescue

THUS, one of the UK's leading suppliers of voice, data, Internet and contact centre services, has developed a much more effective way of dealing with these situations.

Working with four Scottish Councils - Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Highland and Moray - THUS developed an innovative information phone line system to handle large call volumes from families seeking updates on weather conditions, modified bus time tables, what schools and pupils were affected by the weather, and what roads were blocked.

The phone line, which was piloted at Ellon Academy near Aberdeen in the winter of 2001, gives parents access to relevant travel information from a centralised facility, twenty four hours a day. The THUS helpline system is easy-to-use and, exploiting advanced automated call control features, very economic for the Councils to operate.

How It Works

In operation, parents call one of five THUS 0870 national call rate numbers - Banff & Buchan College subsequently joined the scheme - and enter a six-digit PIN unique to any one of the 600 participating schools.

Entry of the PIN provides access to three options. The first is to listen to an out-bound message from the school in question, giving notice of any abnormal local circumstances or emergencies; this can be updated by the particular school in real-time. The second allows parents to leave messages for the school. These are delivered in the form of speech file e-mails. Schools without the necessary PC equipment to receive such files can phone in and pick up parents' recorded messages in the normal way. The third option is access to another out-bound school message system. This delivers up to 10 pre-recorded, non-urgent messages from the school concerning, for example, next-day school meal menus or forthcoming parents events and so on.

The THUS interactive voice response (IVR) system controlling all of this is located in Glasgow. It is able to take delivery of thousands of calls that would otherwise overwhelm the limited number of telephone lines serving each school in the scheme. "Given that the 600 schools covered by the new helpline system collectively have over 100,000 pupils, you can see that call volumes might be very substantial and way beyond an individual school's capability to cope with" says Paul Crozier, the THUS account manager who initiated the development of the system. "I'm a parent myself and I know the frustrations of not being able to readily find out whether my children's school was open or not. Before this system came on-line sometimes the only options were to drive over to the school, or to try and find out what was happening from the television or radio. Neither was satisfactory."

"With the original system it was very, very difficult to get instant information out to parents when we had a problem - not necessarily just because of bad weather, but any crisis within the school. Also parents ringing in were coming through our conventional switchboard which could maybe only handle five calls at a time. Any parent who wanted to ring the school, perhaps because it had started to snow and they were wondering what the school was doing, would be very unlikely to get through" recalls Brian Wilkins, Rector of Ellon Academy, the school that pioneered the helpline. "The beauty of the new system that we started to use last year was that, providing we updated the information regularly - which we did - any number of parents could ring the school and get the most up-to-date information. The parents reacted very positively."

"Interestingly it was also heavily used by staff as well as parents" continues Mr Wilkins. "When the weather was very bad, there were several days when the school had to be closed and it was a way of getting that information out. What we actually did was to have what we called a 'six o'clock bulletin' - people were told that we would make an effort to make decisions by certain times and six in the evening was one of them. Seven o'clock in the morning was another one. It was a huge step forward in being able to keep everyone informed about what was going on."

Brian Wilkins is very impressed with the way THUS worked. "Right from the beginning when THUS came to us and floated the idea as a pilot project we've had a very positive and fruitful working relationship with them. THUS gained an understanding of how the school works and was able to tailor the system for us based on what we were telling them about the school's operational systems."