

High School Boosts Attendance with Online Contact Center

Student attendance is a critical factor not only affecting student achievement, but in the measurement of how well an individual school and school system performs. Martinsburg High School in Berkeley County, West Virginia, has found a new, cost-effective way to increase their daily attendance rate using a combination of email, voice and text notification to parents during the school day. The service, called EZDialer is an extension of the EZCommunicator software already being used by the high school for sending eNewsletters and other electronic announcements.

Relatrix, the leader in Online Contact Center solutions for the K-12 education market, facilitated this pilot project during the 2009/10 school year with its hosted software services. Martinsburg High School (MHS), located in Martinsburg, WV, about 90 miles from Washington, DC, focused on two important changes to the way they previously dealt with tardy or absent students.

First, they notified parents during the school day, rather than after school was out – giving parents an opportunity to deal with their student before an entire day of instruction was lost. Second, they used multiple contact channels to reach parents, including email, voice and text messaging – improving the likelihood that a parent would receive the attendance alert through one or more channels.

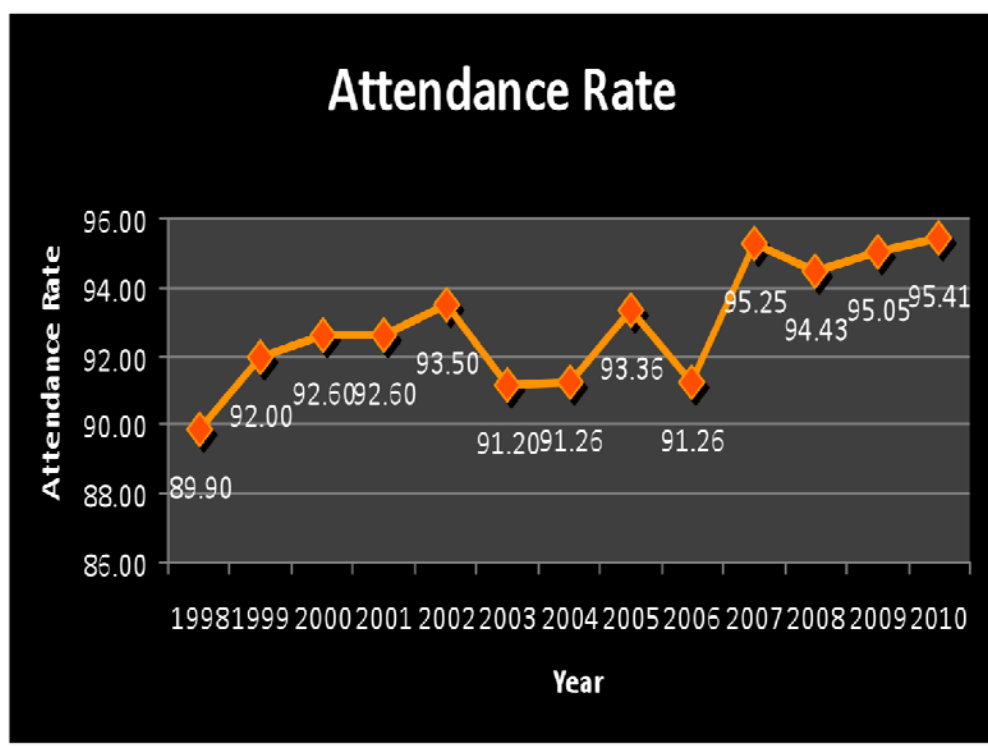
MHS enrolls 1,731 students in grades nine through twelve. The school employs 126 faculty members and 32 staff members. MHS is classified as a diverse suburban school, but has many characteristics of an inner city school. Two middle schools feed into this high school, enrolling 39 percent low socioeconomic status students and servicing 14 different languages.

At the start of the 2009/10 school year the attendance rate of Martinsburg High School students was 95.05 percent compared to 97.38 percent across all Berkeley County schools. Campus administration identified five reasons that contributed to these lower than average attendance numbers:

1. 120 daily student absences were reported to the administration, yet there was no monitoring of whether parents received notification of their student's absence.
2. Daily voice messages were left at home phone numbers at the same time of day; after the end of school when students had been dismissed.
3. Daily voice messages were only left at local home phone numbers.
4. The accuracy of the phone numbers was at a constant low. Since parents didn't receive messages until school dismissed, parents updating home phone number information was infrequent or non-existent.

5. Students skipping school for the day knew when the MHS alert would call their home phone number; hence, the student could retrieve the voice message prior to parents arriving home.

During the first semester of using EZCommunicator and EZDialer, MHS' administration saw increased awareness among students, faculty and parents concerning student attendance and unexcused absences. The administration also recorded the highest attendance rate during the entire 2009/10 school year that the school has historically experienced. The following chart shows the attendance rate at MHS from 1998 through 2010.



“Our improved attendance rate demonstrates students are in class receiving instruction,” said Principal Regina Phillips, who first instituted the new messaging system. Some of the benefits she credits EZCommunicator and EZDialer module with include:

1. Combining email, voice and text notification when sending attendance alerts reaches more parents during the work-day.
2. The ease of sending attendance alerts means the school attendance secretary simply uploads the absent names and numbers after class attendance is taken and then sends a pre-selected notice.
3. Parents receive the message during school operating hours, allowing them to contact the campus staff, if necessary. The previous system dialed local phone calls to home phone numbers starting at 3 pm EST.

4. Parents can now track down students who are reported absent much faster and most students appear in school before the dismissal bell.

5. The ability to track the results of each channel to determine whether a particular attendance message reached a parent helps improve the quality of contact information over time. Parents can update their own profile through the school's website.

6. The calls, texts and emails do not occur at the exact same time every day, and are sent directly to the parent's work or mobile phone in most cases, so students cannot anticipate when their parent will receive the message, nor can they intercept the message in advance

7. Parental notes are now returned to the school faster for excused absences and parents whose child is skipping classes, are helping track down their whereabouts and collaborating with the school administration when disciplinary action is required.

Parents have told school administrators how much they appreciate not getting a phone call during the dinner hour and how they can respond more efficiently to tracking down their child's location and returning the child to school earlier in the course of their work day when notification occurs on multiple channels. "Earlier notification means faster response from parents," added Ms. Phillips.

The principal and assistant principal are also pleased that using these hosted applications freed up a phone line that had been dedicated with the former system to call parents. As a hosted service the software could also be used from any computer with Internet access. The administration also likes that no hardware or software applications needed to be installed or maintained to use the system. "This system is easier to use and costs less than other systems we evaluated," Ms. Phillips stated.

The school's current instruction begins at 7:40 am. The teachers turn in their attendance to the office by 8:30 am. The attendance secretary inputs the data into the Student Information System (SIS). The secretary then generates a report for the assistant principal who creates the absence notice to call, text and email parents between the hours of 10 am and 12 pm.

As a result of this initiative MHS increased both daily and annual attendance rates. Instruction benefitted the student population as state test scores at the school also improved for the 2009/10 school year. The additional pupil funding that MHS received as a result of increased attendance resulted in more than a 20-times payback on the school's investment in EZCommunicator and EZDialer.

MHS will continue using these software services in the 2010/11 school year for attendance notification, as well as for general eCommunications with their parents, staff and community members. Other schools in Berkeley County are now subscribing to these same services to address their individual campus attendance needs.

For more information on how Relatrix can help your school improve attendance, and address your other online communication needs, contact us at 800.570.6234 x1. Email us at sales@relatrix.com or visit our website at www.relatrix.com.