

# Keeping in touch

## New emergency alert system improves school communications

By Kellen Browning

ENTERPRISE CORRESPONDENT

“Your student is safe.” Those four words purposefully placed at the beginning of the Davis Joint Unified School District’s emergency message serve as a quick reassurance to parents and guardians that they shouldn’t panic: Their children are unharmed.

But the emergency message system the district employs for safety drills and actual emergencies has recently undergone drastic change.

SchoolMessenger, a tool previously used to keep track of statistics like absences and tardies, is now the primary method used to contact parents during emergencies.

Maria Clayton, the school district’s public information officer, saw potential for SchoolMessenger as an emergency communications system for a number of reasons.

Perhaps most importantly, while tools like School Loop are opt-in — parents can choose whether they want to receive emails or notifications — SchoolMessenger alerts must be received.

“This is the best way to make sure we’re reaching every person effectively,” Clayton said.

SchoolMessenger also allows the sender to choose the form of communication: email or phone call. Depending on how urgent the message is, it could be a general memo that goes to the top two contacts on each student’s emergency card, or it could be an emergency message sent to all emergency contacts.

Clayton, who was hired at the beginning of the school year, already has made several improvements to the district’s communications system.

“First I had to understand what kind of system we had in place,” Clayton said. “I started asking questions about what systems we use in certain situations.

“What I heard was ... a lot of times parents aren’t good at keeping their emergency contact info updated.”

After determining that SchoolMessenger was the best tool to use, Clayton designed the district’s first emergency communications drill, with most schools operating the drill during their “safety weeks,” when students practice how to respond to everything from a fire to a lockdown.

For the emergency communication drill, Clayton said the purpose was to determine how parents were receiving the communication. She discovered that, although

SchoolMessenger has potential as a valuable tool to keep parents informed, it needed a few tweaks.

“A couple of things happened that led me to make changes,” Clayton said.

“When (the district) sent a general message, only (one parent) was getting info. So ... I changed the universal settings of the system so it will go to at least two emails.”

Clayton also discovered that a texting option for the messenger hadn’t been enabled yet, and that parents who had calls translated into Spanish were having trouble receiving messages.

The drill also allowed the district to see which families weren’t getting the notifications at all.

“It runs reports, so if a principal sends a message out to their entire school, they can see there are 15 families where the email bounced back,” Clayton said.

While these problems required only small fixes to the system, the drill let Clayton and the district work out the kinks now instead of during an actual emergency.

“(Practicing) helps you respond,” said Pioneer Elementary School Principal Matt Duffy, whose school recently performed the safety drill.

“During the crises oftentimes your stress level goes up,” he added, noting that drills allowed both the senders and the receivers to go through the process of responding to an emergency.

The Pioneer drill informed Duffy that some families were only receiving notifications on their home phone, or that only one parent received a message on their cell phone.

If the drill had not taken place, “we would have used SchoolMessenger,” Duffy explained, “but we would have found out (the problems) during the crisis.”

The improved response system was implemented in part due to an incident that took place nearly two years ago.

In February of 2013, Davis High School was placed on lockdown along with three other schools when students reported a man with a weapon (later determined to be a BB gun) near the parking lot of the Stephens Branch Library on 14th Street.

Laura Juanitas, director of student support services for the school district, noted that there were some problems with the way the



FRED GLADDIS/ENTERPRISE PHOTO

Students in Michelle Stellmacher’s sixth-grade class at Pioneer Elementary hustle through a lockdown drill, part of the Davis school district’s efforts to keep kids safe.

district handled the crisis.

“We debriefed as a district with the Davis Police Department and found that some of our communication between sites was not as clear as it could be since this lockdown involved the lockdown of multiple sites,” Juanitas said.

“In part, information that we learned led to our desire to have an emergency communication drill where we can alert parents, and in the case of DSIS (Davis School for Independent Study) students, to the fact that a drill is in progress.”

Added Clayton, “It’s important to learn from those mistakes. In some cases, different departments weren’t notified.

“One of the things that’s really challenging is that when there’s a void of info, it’s often filled with rumors; anyone can post something on Facebook,” she noted.

To clear up any confusion, the district launched its own Facebook page this year to accompany its website.

“(During an emergency), we would also post updates on the website as well as the district Facebook page,” Clayton said.

She believes the new drill will reassure parents that the district takes safety seriously.

“I think that it’s made people more confident that there’s a process in place,” she said.

She also thinks the drill has been highly effective in preparing the school sites and the district office for an emergency.

“It’s always easier when you practice, and when you use systems like this,” Clayton said. “I’ve had nothing but positive feedback from schools that have done it.”

— Kellen Browning is a Davis Enterprise intern and a student at Davis High School.

“This is the best way to make sure we’re reaching every person effectively.”

**Maria Clayton**  
Davis Joint Unified School District public information officer

## What’s happening

### Ongoing

■ Art created by youths at the Progress Ranch group home for boys is on display at the Pence Gallery through Jan. 4.

The artwork was created with the assistance of Sue Ann Foster, a mixed-media expert at Sacramento State who has been working with Progress Ranch students for two months thanks to a grant from Soroptimist International. Gallery hours are Tuesdays through Sundays, 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. The gallery is at 212 D St. and admission is free. For information, visit <http://www.pencegallery.org>.

### Friday

■ The city of Davis will hold an Open Gym from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. for gymnastics and dance students who have missed a class. The gym, at 23 Russell Blvd., is also open to children ages 1-17 who may want to try out gymnastics for the first time. Children ages 1-4 will need to have a parent or guardian supervise them. The fee is \$5 unless the participant is doing a make-up class and gymnastics and dance staff will be available for coaching questions, supervision and fun.

### Tuesday, Jan. 6

■ Nominate a local junior high or high school student for a Golden Heart award. The awards recognize teens who have contributed service to their community or who have overcome a significant personal challenge. Awards will be presented during a ceremony in the Community Chambers at City Hall on Feb. 17, at 6:30 p.m. Nominations are due by 5 p.m. Jan. 6, in the Community Services Office at 600 A St. For information, call 530-757-5626 or visit <http://cityofdavis.org>.

# Time to take a look at financial aid

Hesitate to bring this up because it may be an unwelcome reminder but it is the season again ... not the holiday season, the financial aid season.

For students applying to college (or in college), the new year is the time to fill out most financial aid forms. So, let’s do a quick review (see my College Corner column from December 2012 on my website for more details) and then go over some helpful resources.

### The aid process

**Step 1: Apply to college:** Applying for financial aid is rather cumbersome and not as transparent as it should be. First, students apply to college. Generally, application due dates range from November to March of the senior year. Along with college applications, students and families also must submit financial aid applications.

These deadlines vary depending on the type of application deadline and the college requirements. Aside from financial aid, it is always a good idea to look for scholarships, either via an online database such as [www.fastweb.com](http://www.fastweb.com) or [www.zinch.com](http://www.zinch.com), or more locally at the high school career center or library.

**Step 2: Fill out FAFSA:** All colleges require the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, which becomes available online at <https://fafsa.ed.gov> in January and is due in the beginning of March. This form takes about 45 minutes to complete and calculates the expected family contribution, the basis from which federal aid in the form of grants, loans and work-study will be offered. Keep in mind that you do not need to be admitted before



filling out financial aid forms.

### FAFSA tips

1. Submit it as soon as possible with estimated tax information and then update it later because some funds are distributed on a first-come, first-served basis.
2. Even if you think you will not qualify for financial aid, it is still wise to apply. It is free and you can always turn it down.
3. Once you fill out the FAFSA, if you have a California school on your list you will automatically be considered for Cal Grants. There are no extra forms to fill out.

**Step 3: Fill out the College Scholarship Service Profile, if necessary:** In addition to the FAFSA, there are several hundred mostly private colleges and universities that also require submission of the CSS Profile. This form is available on the College Board website starting in October and tends to be due starting in January.

If you are unsure whether your schools asks for the CSS Profile, you can check its website, or there is a list of the institutions that participate in the CSS Profile process on the College Board website as well.

Similar to the FAFSA, the CSS Profile also asks for additional information such as equity in the home. It is different from the FAFSA because it is not free (\$25 for first

submission and \$16 to each school thereafter) and because it is used to distribute institutional aid — money directly from the school itself rather than from federal funds.

### CSS Profile tips

1. Students applying early may need to submit the CSS Profile. Check each school’s website for exact deadlines.
2. Some schools may require additional forms, such as the Business/Farm Supplement or the Noncustodial Parent’s Supplement.
- Step 4: Compare financial aid packages and select a school to attend by May 1:** Once a student is accepted (usually mid-December for early deadlines and January through March for regular decision) the college sends out a financial aid package. Make sure to analyze the package and compare it to what you have received from other schools.

If something does not make sense, contact the financial aid office. It doesn’t hurt to let them know how interested you are in attending and that you may need additional aid to make that work. In any case, this is why it is imperative to have a financial “safety” school on your list because you never know exactly what you will be offered until after applications are due.

### Helpful resources

Although the process is a bit opaque, there are ways to get a sense of the amount of financial aid to expect.

1. **Quick expected family contribution.** Estimate your expected family contribution

and compare it to the total cost of attendance to see what your demonstrated need is. This is the amount of aid you may qualify for. <http://www.finaid.org/calculators/quickefc.phtml>

### 2. Net price calculator.

Every school must have a net price calculator on its website. Students can enter in basic information about themselves and get a better idea of what the actual cost of that college will be for them.

### 3. Colleges with the most merit aid.

Learn which schools have the most students receiving merit aid (money awarded based on non-sports-related achievement rather than financial need) and apply to at least one. See <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/most-merit-aid>

### 4. College abacus.

This website allows for simultaneous comparison of three schools’ net prices based on personal and financial data. <https://collegeabacus.org>

### Until next year

Although figuring out how to afford college can be one of the most stressful situations, don’t forget that there are many options beside financial aid — community college, gap year, co-op programs and scholarships — that can help make it work. So, just get through this season and remember there is a right college out there for you. Happy New Year!

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