

## Communicating vital information cost-effectively

Castle View School adopts Avanquest Text Message Server to support reduction of absenteeism and discovers that solution has other benefits

Eight-form entry would position Castle View School, on Canvey Island, at the larger end of the secondary school spectrum. Having expanded its intake by a third this year, the school is starting to make plans for its move in 2011 to a purpose-built school on a new site: it is one of the Essex beneficiaries under the Government's Building Schools for the Future initiative. Managing an establishment the size of Castle View draws on the consummate skills of the school leaders. Fortunately, that team is supported increasingly by information systems which reduce the burden of administration and provide an array of statistics which guides decision-making within the school. Like many schools across the UK, Castle View has been running a Capita SIMS information system: it installed the technology two decades ago and the system has evolved to meet the changing demands of the school.

Responsibility for ensuring that the school information management system remains fine-tuned to the needs of Castle View rests with Richard Osborne, whose association with the school dates back to when it was opened in 1980: he joined the teaching staff as Head of Maths. Close on thirty years later, and with a generation spent as part of the senior management team, Mr Osborne has been well placed to develop and fine-tune the SIMS facility at Castle View.

One particular area of interest has been determining how best to communicate 'mission-critical' information to those who require it. When the information is about unauthorised absence from the pupil roll, the people who most need to be told are the parents and carers of the pupils who have not turned up for the day.

### Truancy has been a concern

It would be fair to say that truancy – the largest single cause of unauthorised absence from Castle View - had been a concern for the school for a number of years. As Richard Osborne was able to confirm, the workload on attendance officers had been growing, involving a greater number of phone calls to check on children who were not at school.

There was every possibility that those who were absent were not ill, as there is a strict regime in place at Castle View under which parents should phone the school before 9 am to give a medical reason. By sheer persistence, and a gradual shift in the 'culture' of pupils taking time out, attendance cleared the 90% threshold.

The fact that attendance is now running at nearly 92.5% would suggest a continuing improvement, but that 2.5% change conceals a more fundamental change in strategy.

Mr Osborne recalled that the school decided to treat all in-term holiday absences as unapproved so these were reported in the overall attendance figures. "Because unauthorised absence had increased we were offered additional funds to help improve our attendance rate and one consequence was that every member of staff was supplied with a laptop linked by wireless to the school network.

## significant contribution

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“Teachers take the register at the start of each lesson – there are five lessons and a tutorial session on the timetable each day. It is immediately clear which pupils are missing when they ought to be present, and the fact is recorded back on the SIMS database.”

Assembling serried ranks of attendance data on the school information system did not reduce the attendance officer's time in making calls. By 2006, the point had been reached when the process of calling parents and carers had to be automated, and that is when Richard Osborne evaluated the marketplace for a reliable method of contacting them electronically.

### Avanquest solution adopted

Given that the ‘communication’ would consist of little more than a short statement notifying the absence of a child, text messaging was considered the most suitable alternative to telephone calling. A single message – drawn from a list of prepared texts and personalised with the name of the absentee – could be sent with just a few keystrokes in respect of all those missing.

Run against a list of the day's absentees, the transmission would need no further intervention, saving both the time of the attendance officer and the telephone charges. Against that would have to set the cost of the text message itself, but even the calculations demonstrated the significant benefits of taking such an approach.

The Avanquest Text Message Server was identified as providing probably the most flexible method of producing and distributing texts. The technology was not confined to notification of problems



such as absenteeism or emergency school closures, as it could clearly be used for more ‘customer-friendly’ notifications such as forthcoming school events and individual messages notifying parents of their children's successes at school,

### Greater integration with SIMS

The fact that the Avanquest solution was not at the time closely integrated with the school's SIMS system was not an obstacle for Mr Osborne and his colleagues at Castle View.

“The school management system generates output files in a variety of formats including Excel. We draw off the list of absentees, then the attendance officer eliminates anyone she knows has been absent on the previous day and can therefore be accounted for.

“It is then a very simple task to save the remainder as a .TXT file and use that as the recipient list for the Text Message Server. The Avanquest system has been integrating more closely with the SIMS, which will make the process even more

automated and straightforward than it is at present.”

The adults to whom the SMS has been sent are asked to telephone the school to provide an explanation for the absence, or advise what steps they are taking to locate their child.

One option not available to those parents and guardians is to return a text message. Would that not be the easiest way to communicate, involving a few keystrokes and more likely to elicit a response? It would be less than ideal, according to Richard Osborne: “There is the real possibility that a child could gain access to the adult's phone and we would not be able to confirm who was sending the text back to us.”

### Major contribution

Claiming that the Avanquest Text Message Server had alone been responsible for the further improvement in attendance since its introduction would be untrue and would ignore the positive shift in the underlying attendance ‘culture’ at Castle View. The pupils are made increasingly aware of the positive reasons for regular attendance and the ‘message’ from the school's leaders and staff has been relentless.

Knowing that their parents could be notified within minutes of their non-appearance for registration has sharpened the attitude of many would-be absentees and that risk is seen as a powerful deterrent.

Mr Osborne believes, however, that the SMS service has made a significant contribution at Castle View. “Improved attendance figures benefit the children, the teaching staff and the attendance officers whose time can now be better used to solve the real problem cases.” §

**Avanquest has found a receptive audience in the schools sector of education, where the need to contact parents and guardians urgently - a child not attending school, for example - had been identified.**