

Case Study: Wausau School District



Wisconsin District Secures School Entrances with Visitor Aware

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The Challenge

Wausau School District in northern Wisconsin needed to facilitate check-in for large groups of parents and guardians visiting its schools. However, the tools it had in place were inefficient and restrictive, making the check-in process slow, creating a negative experience for guests and potentially exposing students and staff to dangerous threats.

The Solution

The district implemented Visitor Aware, a visitor management system that enables the district to establish a quick and efficient check-in procedure for all guests. Visitor Aware kiosks allow for flexible setup and scaling, enabling the district to welcome large groups of parents, guardians, and other guests without making the check-in process complicated.

Addressing Visitor Check-In Issues

A secure school means having a secure entrance. At Wausau School District in northern Wisconsin, Cale Bushman, director of pupil services, understood the importance of being able to know who was coming into school buildings, but the tools that were in place limited how many guests schools were able to welcome. With parents, guardians, and other guests coming to attend events for the district's 8,000 students at 13 elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools, Bushman and his colleagues were looking for a better way to check in guests, without sacrificing any of the security measures required to keep students and staff safe.

"In a way, schools become customer service hubs," explained Bushman. "We have families and parents that we want to take care of. We want them to feel comfortable. We don't want a cumbersome process that burdens them when coming through. But we still want our facilities to be a very safe place for students."

The issues with the system in place became so severe though that some schools in the district wouldn't even hold events that would lead to large numbers of guests needing to check in. This was due in part to the length of time it took to check everyone in, but it also became a safety concern for teachers.

"Our staff didn't want to have large group events," said Sarah Budny, principal at Riverview Elementary in the district. "Staff didn't feel comfortable having adults in the building without a strong check-in process in place. Our school culture suffered because we couldn't connect with parents and the larger community by welcoming them into our building."

The district needed a fast, reliable, and cost-effective solution to accommodate its needs while still creating a safe environment for its students and staff.



Selecting and Implementing a Solution

Bushman and his colleagues turned to Visitor Aware, a visitor management system from Singlewire Software. Upon arrival, guests now use the check-in kiosks at every school entrance. Guests present a photo ID which is scanned using an iPad and have their picture taken with the iPad's camera. The information is then screened against national sex offender databases, government watchlists, court orders, and customer-banned visitor lists. Issues are flagged and the appropriate staff are notified immediately so they can intervene, while permitted guests are given a printed badge that demonstrates they have completed the check-in process and are allowed to be in the school.

"It's very important that we know who's in our building during the day," said Bushman. "It gives us a little bit more information on who we're letting in, and gives us more control of the security of our building."

School staff have appreciated that the new tool establishes clear protocols for guests, making it easy to spot potential issues.

"Staff are at ease knowing that there is a process in place," said Budny. "The badges make it easy to identify guests who have gone through the system, and staff are trained to intervene when they see someone without a badge."

In addition to the safety benefits, Visitor Aware provided a cost-effective solution that the district could implement quickly. Since the entire check-in process can be conducted with an iPad, the district could use hardware it already had and no longer needed to invest in and maintain costly proprietary scanners. This also made implementation quick because as a cloud-based app, the district's technology team could simply push the app out to the iPads, set them up, and leverage single sign-on for an easy login process for system administrators.



"The whole process for seventeen schools took approximately two weeks to get implemented," said Travis Bruch, security technician at the district.

That speed applied to the implementation as well as the check-in process itself, changing the way the district was able to engage with its community.

The Impact on Visitors

One of the biggest impacts the district has experienced since implementing Visitor Aware is the ability to check in large groups for special events.

"We're not relying on proprietary hardware, which means we can expand more quickly," said Jon Euting, director of technology for the district. "We could really make the system be what we needed it to be on an event-by-event basis. If we need to add more check-in stations, we can simply put out more iPads."

The positive effect of this simplified process is evident to anyone coming into the district's buildings.

“What I like most about this system is the expressions that I see on some of our visitors when they come in,” said Dr. Rob Phelps, principal at Horace Mann Middle School in the district. “After they’re all checked in, they’re like, ‘That’s it?’ It’s that quick for them.”

Since Wausau uses the facial recognition capabilities available with Visitor Aware, guests only need to use their ID to check in during their first visit. After that, they simply need to have their picture taken with the iPad to complete the process. While the majority of guests complete the process without incident, Visitor Aware has alerted the district about potential issues, making it easy for them to intervene.

“When something comes up, we’re notified directly and we deal with it immediately,” said Phelps.

The system has the added benefit of demonstrating to community members that safety is a priority in the district from the moment someone enters a building. And feedback on the system has been positive.

“For parents, this may be their first school experience, so we want to be welcoming while helping them understand that safety is important to us,” said Budny. “But they also really appreciate how quickly it’s gone. We had some comments this year that said, ‘Oh, this process is quicker than what it’s been.’ It has been, and that’s been really great to hear.”

Visitor Aware helps Wausau enhance school building safety at the entrances, but the district has additional tools in place to help with safety and communication should emergencies arise.



Leveraging Mass Notification

The district also relies on Singlewire Software for its mass notification and incident management needs. Wausau uses the company’s InformaCast solution to help with daily operations like live audio announcements, and managing school bells and clocks. It can also broadcast notifications when a panic button is activated on school grounds and receive notifications when someone dials 911 from a phone within a school building.

“It’s the speed of communication that often determines if it was a successful handling,” said Euting. “So the ability to communicate directly into a building and then quickly share that with other areas

that might also be affected or just create an awareness is critical in any kind of response system.”

The district has plans to further expand its use of InformaCast in the near future by reviewing integrations with its IP speakers, security systems, door access controls, and video cameras. It is also exploring leveraging the mobile capabilities of InformaCast for mobile panic buttons and initiating alerts remotely when incidents arise so people do not need to be in front of a desk in a specific building to start the notification process.

“We have a large number of traveling staff across the district,” said Julie Abraham, technology support manager at the district. “It’s very important that if there’s an intruder or a situation at a building that those staff are notified so they don’t enter a dangerous situation.”

For more information about how your school or district can take advantage of the safety benefits offered by Visitor Aware and InformaCast, visit www.singlewire.com/informacast-k12-education.