

# Surviving Snowmageddon

How three schools kept parents informed during a record-breaking weather crisis



**Weather-related crises can occur at any time of year** – spring storms, summer heat waves, autumn winds, winter blizzards – so school administrators must be prepared to react to inclement weather at any time. New multimodal communication technologies make it easier than ever to keep students, parents, and staff well-informed as conditions evolve.

When “[Snowmageddon](#)” struck the Baltimore/Washington metropolitan area in early 2010, here is how three independent schools in Baltimore – Bryn Mawr School, Boys’ Latin School and Calvert Hall College High School – used Omnilert’s e2Campus multi-modal communication system to update students, parents and staff throughout the crisis.

The rapid series of winter storms piled 50-80 inches of snow on the region in just 12 days. The initial storm hit January 29, blanketing Baltimore with 5 inches of snow and forcing some schools to close early that Friday afternoon. On Tuesday a second storm added 4-6 more inches. Just three days later on February 5, a record-breaking blizzard dumped another 20-30 inches of snow.

Before authorities could complete the snow clearing, yet another blizzard struck on February 10 adding ten more inches of snow. High winds of 35 miles per hour left snow drifts up to 6 feet tall and downed many already weakened trees. Hundreds of secondary roads and residential streets remained unplowed. More than 200,000 homes lost power and millions of people were snowbound for several days.

Because Bryn Mawr School, Boys’ Latin School and Calvert Hall had all previously deployed e2Campus, they had a fast, easy, reliable way to reach their parents and staff throughout the storms.

Used by more than 750 schools nationwide, e2Campus empowers schools to send time-sensitive messages to students, parents, and staff. The web-based system provides a centralized interface for instantly and simultaneously sending advisories to thousands of people anywhere, anytime, and on any device.

During the first week of February 2010 the e2Campus system successfully delivered more than 5 million text messages and a million voice calls and emails for its users. Countless more messages were viewed via web page posts, desktop alerts, social media, and other endpoints.



### Bryn Mawr School

Founded in 1885, Bryn Mawr School was one of the earliest college prep schools for girls. Today the school serves 900 students in four age divisions from a 26-acre campus within the Baltimore city limits.

In early 2009 after several young children were stranded when a power outage and a sudden sewer incident forced early school closures, Caroline Pinkin, Director of Parent Programs, began searching for a better way to send parents urgent messages.

The traditional phone tree system was no longer effective. More parents were working; many were mobile. It became increasingly difficult to reach parents at their home numbers on file with the school. Tracking parents down when developing situations required a mid-day closure took a particularly long time.

Although the school's existing email system offered an effective way to communicate with parents, administrators found it ineffective for emergency communications. Many parents did not check email prior to leaving for school and work. Many ignored email messages during the work day since the system was used for both urgent messages and routine communications.

Bryn Mawr School needed a better way to reach parents quickly so Caroline deployed e2Campus.

When Snowmageddon hit, the staff at Bryn Mawr decided to give parents as much notice about closures as possible and minimize last-minute calls. Instead of requiring parents to check every morning for school closings, they made announcements for 2-3 days at a time.

They used the e2Campus system to send text, email and phone messages to their parents as conditions evolved. Multiple delivery formats allowed parents to receive messages in their preferred formats.

"Most people found it to be a wonderful service because it is instantaneous," explained Caroline. "Every school should look into it."



*Bryn Mawr School under the massive snow – e2Campus is a simple, effective communication system that “saved a lot of people a lot of headaches.”*





### Calvert Hall College High School

Calvert Hall was founded in 1845 by members of the renowned Catholic De La Salle Christian Brothers order. Today the school serves over 1200 high school students in grades 9-12 at its 33-acre campus.

In 2009 network administrator Austin Ewachiw began looking for a way to modernize Calvert Hall's communication system and take advantage of advances in mobile technology. He realized the proliferation of smart phones - particularly among professionals and higher income individuals like his school's parents - offered an opportunity to significantly enhance the school's ability to communicate with parents quickly and easily.

The school had a sophisticated website, but relied on traditional phone trees for getting urgent messages to parents. They often had difficulty reaching parents quickly.

When police instituted a neighborhood lockdown and closed all roads leading to the school after a robbery at a nearby bank, Austin knew he needed to find a better way to send truly urgent messages to parents.

Calvert Hall parents quickly embraced the new e2Campus system. More than 800 families signed up in just the first few weeks of its deployment. This made it easy for school officials to depart from their normal practice of following the Baltimore County closure schedule during the February storms.

When the county decided to close for the entire week of February 15th, Calvert Hall's administration felt such a decision was unnecessary for their students who did not rely on buses. They used the e2Campus system to send text and voice messages notifying relieved parents that the school would reopen on February 17th. The parents' high adoption of the system ensured that nearly every family received the message. On the day the school reopened, attendance and tardies were on par with most school days.

"The fact that e2campus answers questions a lot of people have quickly and easily put a lot of people at ease," said Austin. "It's there when we need it."



### Boys' Latin School

Boys' Latin School, the oldest nonsectarian boys' school in Maryland, was founded in 1844. Today the school serves 640 students from kindergarten through 12th grade at its 42-acre campus on the Baltimore city/county border.

In 2009 Anne Kellerman, Director of Technology Programs at Boys' Latin realized that a differentiated emergency communication system would be more effective than relying only on the school's sophisticated email system. She heard that other schools were having success with Omnilert's e2Campus system and decided to evaluate it.



*Boys' Latin School now able to proactively contacts the school's constituency – parents, faculty, staff – and know with confidence the system will reach them wherever they are.*

During Snowmageddon, Anne and her team sent ten e2Campus alerts to update parents and staff during the storms. They supplemented the urgent communications with longer, more detailed messages from their bulk email system.

Because Boys' Latin is located in a residential neighborhood, the school remained impassible even after many main and secondary roads were cleared.

Throughout the storm Anne was able to send updates to parents quickly and easily. "In the time it takes to let your dog out, you've sent messages to 2000 people. It's really painless."

Anne also included special updates for staff during the storm. "We had to alert staff 'don't come into the office,' to prevent them from coming in during the snow days to get extra work done. The roads were not plowed."

## Lessons Learned

Advanced preparation is key. "This is one of those, hopefully, once in a lifetime situations. I think we handled it the best we could. Our greater community was very grateful to have this system in place because it saved a lot of people a lot of headaches," explained Caroline.

Multimodal communications are important for message delivery confidence. Having a variety of services - voice, email, text messaging - in one unified messaging service provides a lot of flexibility.

Austin explained, "We're in a mobile world. The ability to alert people by text message means you can reach them anywhere." Parents at Calvert Hall like the ability to select their preferred message modes among text, email and phone.

Having a dedicated emergency communication channel is important. Maintaining separate systems for routine communications and urgent messages increases recipient attention and response. All three schools reserve the e2Campus system strictly for emergencies. "When users get an E2 message, they know it is important," notes Caroline.

Reliability fosters trust. With a trusted system in place, parents are confident they will know what's going on. When it snows, they get the school's message early and can go back to sleep.

"I have never, ever encountered any problems or difficulties or confusion at all with e2Campus," said Anne. "It's been easy to use, up and running all of the time."

Grouping and selective targeting adds significant value. The ability to group students is crucial when urgent situations affect only a subset of students. When traffic delayed students' return during a recent 7th grade field trip, Caroline was able to target messages to warn those parents of the later arrival. This prevents the attention erosion that would occur if parents routinely received irrelevant alerts.

Integration with existing systems and using them in concert adds value. Both Anne and Caroline supplement their urgent e2Campus alerts with less urgent email messages when appropriate. Austin worked closely with Omnilert's technical services team to fully integrate the e2Campus system into the school's existing web infrastructure. With a single sign-on for both the website and the alerting system, parents can easily select communication options and update contact information.



*Calvert Hall College High School survives Snowmageddon - Parents love the system. "We're in a mobile world. The ability to alert people by text message means you can reach them anywhere."*



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