

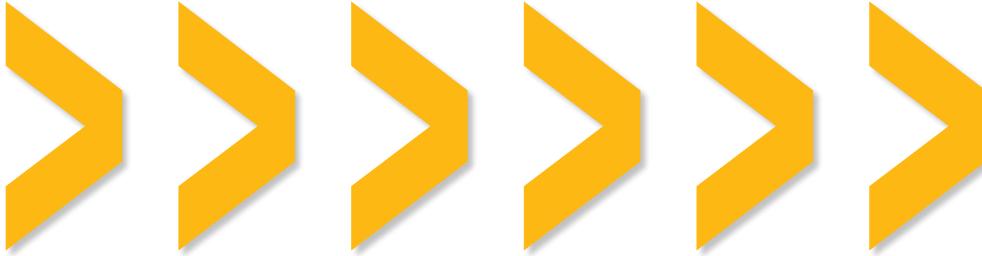
# Get the Word Out with List Servers



»»»»»» By Laurence Goldberg

In my school district of about 7,300 students in suburban Philadelphia (Abington SD), electronic mail list servers are now being used, along with other methods of communication, to disseminate information quickly and widely. We began by manually maintaining lists of e-mail addresses. It soon became apparent that we needed a more hands-free method of allowing parents and community members to receive information. This is when we moved to a list server model.

A list server is simply an automated list of e-mail addresses used to communicate with people on certain topics. Users can join or leave list servers themselves, without any intervention on the part of the schools. We first began testing using one of the free online services; however, the sign-up method was confusing, and the commercial advertising was distracting. Instead, we settled on a self-



maintained software package (in this case, GFI Mail Essentials) to create group lists that could be accessed directly. The list server software is relatively simple to install and maintain, running as an intermediary server to a mail server running a program such as Microsoft Exchange.

Hopefully it won't come as a shock that sending home photocopied handouts in student folders is no longer a cutting-edge method of communication. How many of those fliers actually make their way to parents, and how many end up crumpled at the bottom of an overstuffed backpack? And of those that survive the journey home, how many get lost when they fall off the magnet clip and slip into the neverland of dustballs and loose change under the refrigerator grille?

Happily, list servers are a better way. These days, even in less advantaged school districts, many households are equipped with computers and e-mail access. Even parents who do not have access at home often have access at work or through a local library or community center. School districts are only beginning to take advantage of this valuable method of communication.

Most schools now have their own Web sites. Yet without dedicated staff that can invest substantial time

in maintaining current information and updates, school Web sites often provide only general, relatively static information. And Web sites are based on pull technology, meaning that viewers must take the time and effort to seek and download the information they need. Push technology, by contrast, sends the information out to the target audience. For schools to really get the message out to their target audience of parents, students, and community members, they need to use effective push technology. E-mail is one of the most basic methods of pushing essential communication.

Just as schools have developed telephone chains and postal mail directories, some schools have developed lists of e-mail addresses. The problem with this is that it places an additional burden on school staff, and the lists never remain accurate for very long. People change ISPs or e-mail accounts frequently, and misspelling a single letter in an e-mail address can prevent a parent from getting mail. Moreover, when the school is responsible for maintaining a mailing list, it opens itself to criticism if some parents are inadvertently left off. In some cases, if senders are careless and enter multiple individual addresses in the To field, they will reveal personal addresses to all recipients, which can

## > ISTE's List Server Communities

ISTE members have a variety of organizational list servers available to them. Access to the lists and other community-building tools is under the Membership section of the ISTE Web site (<http://www.iste.org>). From the Membership page, choose My Communities and explore the options your membership plan affords.

Among the most commonly used community tools are the list servers. Nearly every one of the ISTE SIGs (special interest groups) maintains a list server so that members can share insights, discuss hot topics, and help each other out.

ISTE's list server software allows members to choose direct e-mail delivery of each list message, daily or weekly digests, or no e-mail delivery (you can retrieve messages from the community Web area).

The ISTE list servers are configured to be interactive. This means that members of the list are allowed to post messages to the group, even messages with attachments. However, as with most lists, you cannot post directly to individuals. The other members, of course, will not be able to respond directly to you either. This is usually considered an advantage of the list server model because it diminishes the number of "private" conversations that can clutter a forum area.

➤➤➤➤➤ J.V. Bolkan,  
Senior Editor, L&L

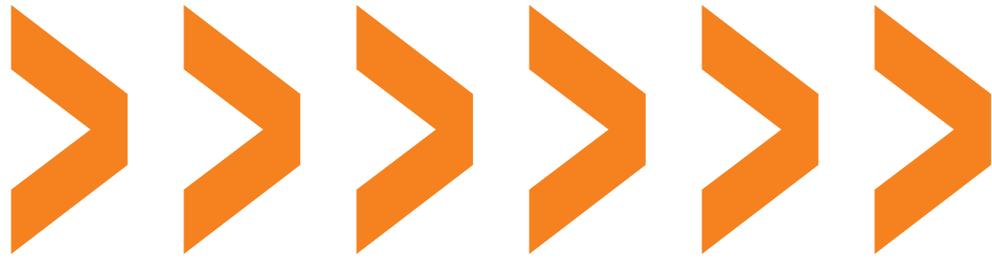
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lead to spammers' harvesting the list of addresses and then bombarding them with spam.

We created a list server for parents and students of each of the nine schools, and an additional list server geared toward residents without children, interested community members, or anyone seeking information on the entire district. We publicized the list servers in various ways: with fliers sent home with students, hard copy newsletters, school Web sites, and the local cable television station. Those interested in subscribing need only send a blank e-mail message to a special account and then reply to an automated confirmation message. If subscribers type in an incorrect address, they will know because they won't get the confirmation—and the list server will notify us of the unsuccessful attempt. Incorrect or discontinued addresses are automatically removed from the system. Subscribers can leave the group by unsubscribing in a similar manner. The beauty of the system is that it can accommodate thousands of subscribers with little or no maintenance.

When principals or administrators wish to send a message out, they must use a generic account as the sender. This way, the sender will not be identi-

fied as an individual and will not be flooded with response messages. For example, at Abington School District, there is a generic account for each school that is used as the originating mailbox. If the originator accidentally tries to send messages from his or her personal mailbox or an unauthorized sender attempts to send to the group, the message is rejected and never reaches the group. Subscribers are not able to send messages directly to other group members, nor are their e-mail addresses revealed to one another, or third parties. Rights are assigned to authorized senders for each list server. We also created a catch-all group that contains all of the district list server members, so that certain individuals such as the superintendent could reach the entire wired community with a single message.

At first, things took off slowly. It took a while for a couple hundred subscribers to sign up, and when they did, the messages from the school were only trickling out. School newsletters, meeting and event reminders, board information, and other communication started flowing across the list servers to those early adopters. Then the first snows came, and suddenly there was a burst of activity. Although Abington already posted

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weather-related information on the community cable station and Web site, along with notifying local media outlets of this information, we were happy to be able to offer a convenient and instantaneous way to disseminate information directly to parents. On a snowy morning when we called our first late arrival of the season, list server subscribers who checked their e-mail were among the first to know. This quickly drove subscription rates up and got the word out as to the effectiveness of the list servers. And because we use Web-based e-mail, authorized senders can reach the entire subscribed school district community at any time from any Internet-connected location. The power of this should not be underestimated at five o'clock on a winter morning, or any time quick and effective communication is essential.

As a district actively involved in major construction and fundraising projects, Abington is also now able to more effectively disseminate information regarding these endeavors. The superintendent uses the list server to send out newsletters highlighting district awards and accomplishments. Other possible uses of the list servers include informing residents about issues related to district funding, legisla-

tive changes, and school quality measures. With increased emphasis on accountability through standardized testing and the mandates of NCLB, it is incumbent upon public school districts across the United States to do a better job of reaching out and reporting back to their communities. We must be able to effectively communicate with constituents, educate them on the issues that challenge us, call them to action when needed, solicit their input and support, tell them of our accomplishments and achievements, and remind them of the value they're receiving for their investment. It is no longer sufficient for us to be effective educators and administrators; we must also be active promoters and public relations experts. The list server method of communicating is just one tool in the well-equipped technology tool belt we must all wear in a fully wired and connected educational community.



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