



BY DR. ELNARDO J. WEBSTER
COMMENTARY

As superintendent of a public school system, it is easy to get caught up in the day-to-day details of running a school district and not take time to adequately reflect on the big picture. I am by all accounts a big picture guy, but even I have to make a conscious effort to step away from the paperwork for a half-hour once a week and ask myself, "are we heading in the right general direction as a school district? Are we fulfilling the mission of public education?"

Our mission at Roselle Public Schools is to provide the best possible educational experience our resources can provide. We intentionally use the phrase "educational experience" instead of the word "education" because it more accurately describes what a student needs to thrive. An educational experience is more than just access to excellent academics. It encompasses numerous student quality of life issues, including recreation, extra-curricular activities, a sense of community and safety.

That last point — safety — is too often overlooked by school districts like Roselle where violence is not a frequent problem. Safety is so much more than protection from violence. In a school, it is about establishing an environment where students only have one concern: to be the best possible students they can be. That is why we placed a security guard in every school last year.

This year we are taking it a step further. We just recently launched the first interactive Safety and Security Management System (SSMS) in New Jersey, a system that allows us to protect our students and contains educational tools for students and parents. We believe student safety should be an interactive process, where students can learn how to enhance their own safety and security and parents have the comfort of knowing that their student is safe at school.

Our SSMS is the new pride and joy of our school community. It enables us to alert parents in the event of an emergency directly via cell phone text message, email, Blackberry PIN and other mobile messaging devices. It will also come in handy for weather-related school closings and for announcing other important events, as we can use the same mass-messaging technology for non-emergency situations as well. The perimeter security technology our SSMS employs allows authorized officials to monitor school security cameras and control access to buildings when necessary. When school is closed or when there is an emergency situation in one of our schools, we can extend monitoring capabilities directly to the Roselle Police Department.

The bottom line is this technology will make our students safer. It will make them smarter, too. The SSMS contains safety-related, interactive coursework students can complete with their parents that will improve their personal safety IQ. We are currently hosting a 16-minute course through our SSMS portal on swine flu safety and will be hosting a course on internet safety in the near future. The portal is fully customizable, so we can post very specific, detailed information on local safety issues in the near future.

I'm proud that we are the first school district in New Jersey to offer parents this type of peace of mind and students, this one-of-a-kind learning opportunity. Roselle parents had a lot of concerns about swine flu during the spring and summer. We proactively sought out the services of Virtual Ed Link to see what we could do to address those concerns. They were able to roll swine flu preparedness together with several of our other security initiatives to create a powerful security portal every member of the Roselle Public Schools community can access.

Ensuring our classrooms are a safe place for children to learn is an important part of any public education mission, and allowing students and parents to actively participate makes the process much more effective.

Dr. Elnardo J. Webster is the Superintendent of Public Schools in Roselle. He may be reached at (908) 298-2040.