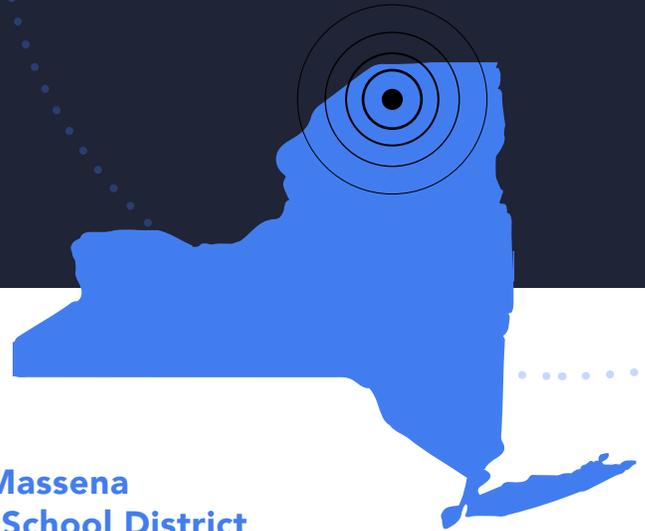




CASE STUDY

Massena Central School District



About Massena Central School District

The Massena Central School District in New York serves 2,800 students in grades K-12. It's located minutes away from the Canadian border in the St. Lawrence River Valley—a beautiful rural setting with a population of 15,000 residents. The district's 440 employees are split evenly between instructional and support staff.

	Initial 6.5-week trial	2021-22 School Year: Sept-Oct
Number of Schools	5	5
Messages Sent (over 10 Weeks)	13,105	46,580
Estimated Seconds to Send	90	90
District Staff Hours Saved	328	1,164.5
District Staff Hours Saved	\$13,651	\$48,520.84

Challenges

Educators and staff at Massena prioritize communication with families using a range of tools, from email to parent cafés. The district has cultivated a culture of innovation, so when administrators learned of AllHere through the nonprofit organization Attendance Works, they reached out to find out more about how this novel two-way communication tool might fit into their existing systems.

Massena tested the technology in a grant-supported, 6.5-week trial during the 2020-21 school year. Based on the successful trial, Massena adopted AllHere’s chatbot—which they nicknamed Raider—on a district-wide basis in the fall of 2021.

Administrators intended to focus weekly programmed messages on a targeted attendance initiative. However, the first very text message in the campaign prompted robust feedback from families. They loved Raider, but they had concerns about the timing of an attendance push in light of issues ranging from COVID quarantines to bus driver shortages to readjustments to full-time in-person learning.

Challenges

Acknowledging the validity of parents’ concerns, Massena pivoted quickly to a new three-part focus for its messaging through AllHere:

-  Mental health
-  Academics
-  Attendance

“We use the bot to ask if students are feeling stressed out and how their academics are going,” said Kristin Colarusso-Martin, Community Schools Director at Massena. Based on parents’ replies, Raider can provide links to mental health services and academic supports at school or in the community.

Raider has also been integral to COVID-related communication. Early on, the bot kept families informed about safety and answered incoming questions about mask policies for elementary and special education students. When the vaccine was approved for 5- to 11-year-olds, the chatbot was an integral part of the plan to let families know about vaccination clinics.

“You can never over-communicate with your parent community, and this is a great avenue of engagement with them,” said District Superintendent Patrick Brady.



Implementation

To ensure consistency and accuracy going into the 2021–22 school year, Colarusso–Martin fine-tuned the spreadsheet of data Raider uses as its customized knowledge base. Massena’s staff had created a robust catalog of information during the trial phase in the spring of 2021, so Colarusso–Martin was able to hone the setup and planning of messages—and to incorporate requests from community partners and parent-led organizations outside the school system.

In order to address the expected social-emotional needs of students returning to school, Massena bolstered its mental health capacity by adding two new full-time social workers in addition to a partnership with a local organization that embeds counselors in the district’s schools. To address academic needs, Massena has an ongoing student tutoring partnership with St. Lawrence University.

However, once the school year started, administrators quickly realized they needed to publicize the availability of these resources more effectively—and Raider was just the tool to do that. “We tell parents, ‘You’re not alone. We’re here to help you. We have the resources. Reach out,’” Brady said. “It’s important that we make the information as accurate and comprehensive as we can, because if parents have to wait for responses, the efficacy of the system breaks down.”

Results

In the first two months of the school year, Raider sent 46,580 messages, saving nearly 1,200 hours of staff time. Since implementing Raider, the district has noticed families’ level of engagement varies depending on the topic of the weekly (or sometimes twice-weekly) messages as well as individual family situations. Massena continues to hone its outbound communication, using a combination of research-based content provided by AllHere along with messages and replies it generates locally.

Feedback from families has been overwhelmingly positive—and few have chosen to opt out of the system. “Parents feel like they’re being heard by the school,” Colarusso–Martin said. “They feel like they have a voice.”

Other impact included:

- ✔ Sign-ups for Massena’s summer program spiked after families received a message about enrollment.
- ✔ Parents provided a wealth of immediate feedback in response to an attendance campaign, which the administration used to inform its decision to change direction.
- ✔ Families who have concerns about their student’s emotional well-being frequently to reach out via text—and often say they’re surprised by the quick turnaround times when the chatbot escalates to an in-person response.
- ✔ Parents who don’t have the workplace flexibility to call the school during business hours appreciate being able to text when it’s convenient for them.



Going forward, Brady said, the district will eventually re-launch the attendance campaign using AllHere’s two-way communication platform—when the timing is right. And based on the strong level of support for Raider among parents, teachers, and staff, Massena is looking to add more features in the future to help navigate the ever-changing education landscape.

Raider answers 86.3% of incoming texts within seconds thanks to Massena’s customized knowledge base.

For more information, details, or to set up your own two-way communication program, visit www.allhere.com.