



Tackling heat and lightning dangers to student-athletes

Polk County Public Schools, Bartow, Florida

"What we love about [DTN] the most is that you can send unlimited text messages to people. Every coach in our system will get a text message when lightning is within 30, 15, and 8 miles of the facility — and you can personalize each text [giving instructions on what to do], and then you will get a text with an all-clear, knowing when it is safe to go back outside."

Dan Talbot, athletic director,
Polk County Public Schools

Located less than an hour from Tampa and Orlando, Polk County Public Schools (PCPS) is one of the largest school districts in Florida — and the United States — covering over 1,850 square miles. With more than 150 schools and 110,000 students in traditional K-12 and numerous other programs, PCPS serves students with a wide variety of abilities and backgrounds.

The organization dates back more than 150 years, and throughout its growth, PCPS continues to focus on excellence and innovation. Its mission is to provide a high-quality education for all in its diverse student population.

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"Student-athlete safety is our number one priority, so to have something that basically tells you the ambient temperature at that moment in time... you can get projections of when WBGT changes, because in Florida if it is over 92.1 degrees there's no outdoor activities."

Dan Talbot, athletic director, Polk County Public Schools

What were they up against?

Lightning and heat-related illness are the two biggest concerns for Dan Talbot, athletic director at PCPS. Florida has state mandates the district must follow to address heat risks. According to Talbot, Florida is also the lightning capital of the world, so it's always a major concern for their athletic events, spring through fall. Heat illness is also a frequent concern; it can be 95 degrees earlier in the day, but late afternoon can turn dark as a thunderstorm rolls in. An hour later, the sun is back, and it's hot and very humid.

What did we do to help?

WeatherSentry® from DTN addresses those main concerns — heat and lightning. Every school in the district has desktop access to the industry-leading weather visualization and alerting system. PCPS administrators rely upon the corresponding smartphone app to help quickly make informed decisions about whether games and practices should be cancelled or postponed. By having unlimited text messages, the district can also send notices to every coach in their system when lightning is nearby, using WeatherSentry's custom message option to give instructions on what to do next. There's even an all-clear notification that indicates when it is safe to go back outside.

Talbot shared they use the solution's Wet Bulb Globe Temperature (WBGT) content to help avoid heat-related illness. WBGT measures heat stress in direct sun, not only factoring in temperature and humidity, but also wind speed, the sun's angle, and cloud cover; the heat index only accounts for temperature and humidity — and is taken in the shade. Florida requires specific operational procedures to protect student-athletes when the WBGT reaches a certain threshold. These include more frequent

water breaks, additional rest time, changes in the amount of equipment worn, and more. As an athletic director, it's Talbot's job to quickly communicate the necessary information for all outdoor sports, including cross country, football, baseball, and soccer.

What impact did this have?

Athletic directors can't be everywhere at once, monitoring current and impending weather conditions and simultaneously communicating with staff. WeatherSentry streamlines the effort by keeping head and assistant coaches updated with text alerts for specific risks, the steps they need to take to manage them, and when it's safe to resume play or practice.

After relying on WeatherSentry for some time, PCPS began using it to monitor weather threats as students moved between buildings on its campuses or when dismissal times may need adjusting for safety reasons. With nearly 50,000 students depending on its busing system, which covers approximately 61,000 miles each day, such decisions need planning and precision.

In addition to enhancing safety, WeatherSentry saves PCPS time and money. For example, holding buses when a game or practice should have been called off is costly. Such decisions are made easier with the consult-a-meteorologist feature in the app. Within minutes, a skilled forecaster can support cancel/delay decisions, driving greater confidence. Having a weather professional, custom alerts, and risk management tools on-hand allows the district's coaching staff to focus on their core duties while keeping everyone safer.

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