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Best practices: Perimeter door security and access management in schools

Although school shootings are a rarity in the United States, they command the lion's share of media attention when it comes to reporting on school violence. It's an unfortunate reality that these tragedies often serve as a catalyst for other school administrators to take a hard look at their security measures, particularly their vulnerability to outside attacks.

But progress is being made. According to a new study by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the percentage of public schools reporting the use of security cameras increased from just 19 percent in 1999–2000 to 75 percent in 2013–2014. During this same time, the percent of public schools reporting that they controlled access to school buildings by locking or monitoring doors during school hours increased to 93 percent. This is an increase of 18 percent from 1999-2000.

The push for improving school security has also had some unfortunate results. Several states have ignored both existing codes and fire marshal warnings and gone ahead and approved the installation and use of barricade devices. Many of these devices are not code compliant and could actually prohibit egress and endanger the life safety of the school's occupants in the event of an emergency. Rather than installing devices that could potentially put lives at risk, school officials and administrators should instead be encouraged to consult with security professionals to evaluate their existing security measures and protocols and develop a strategy that will implement best practices for improving their perimeter security and access management to help create a safer learning environment.

Here are nine areas to consider:

1 Single point of entry during school hours. This is preferably a front door location that is easily seen and supervised to provide more control over who should—and shouldn't—enter the building. The main entrance should be clearly marked by signage with directions to a visitor management center. By architects establishing one primary location for individuals to enter the building, they are creating a far more secure environment.

2 Vestibule to manage visitor entry to school and the front office. A vestibule at the main entrance provides an additional layer of perimeter security. The design automatically funnels visitors into a main office before granting them access to other parts of the school. The vestibule is open and monitored while students are arriving in the morning and once classes begin, the door is locked. As visitors approach, an intercom system, camera, impact-resistant windows and pass-through drawers should be used to allow staff to safely verify each visitor's identity and reason for entering before he or she is allowed access to the office via a push-button release.

3 Visitor management software. A visitor management software system employed at the vestibule entrance offers a number of access management benefits, including allowing control to secured areas, knowing who's on campus and the reason for his or her visit, pre-registering visitors, screening against unwanted guests and performing background checks on visitors before allowing them access.

First, the visitor's credential (driver's license, military ID, etc.) is scanned and their information is automatically captured. Second, other information is captured as needed, such as a signature, photo, the name of the person being visited and reason for the visit. Third, a customized visitor badge is printed and issued. If an access control system is in place throughout the school, issuing electronic credentials can ensure the visitor is given access only to the areas of the school that are required—preventing access to areas where they don't belong. Schools should also ensure that a clear policy is stated, notifying guests that visitor badges should be worn at all times while in the school.

4 Electronic access control. Implementing an access control system provides many benefits, including providing a higher level of security, additional visibility and reporting of activity, more control over secured areas, lowered risk of illegally duplicated keys and an easier and less expensive method for replacing lost or damaged credentials. The risk of unwelcome visitors entering school grounds is mitigated because individuals must present a credential such as a card, fob or PIN to gain access.

There are two basic types of electronic access control systems: offline and networked. Offline, or standalone, solutions are not connected to a network and include mechanical and electronic locks. These locks cannot communicate with each other, but require a credential such as a key, PIN or card for access. Conversely, networked electronic access control systems are connected to a network either wirelessly or by being hardwired to the system and provide real-time control through access control software. This provides the potential to lockdown faster and can be integrated with other systems, such as video cameras, digital video recording, alarm monitoring and badging.

5 **Interoperable communications platform.** A successful perimeter security and access management plan requires the collaboration and participation of all involved parties, including first responders. At the first sign of an emergency, schools need to ensure that police, fire and rescue personnel can quickly be alerted of the problem and provide help. Putting into place an interoperable communications platform allows school security to alert first responders of an incident using two-way radios, and provide first responders immediate access to the building.

6 **Panic alarm system.** Panic buttons add an extra layer of security to a comprehensive perimeter security and access management plan. They can be placed at strategic points, such as just inside the entry vestibule where incoming visitors are checked in or in each classroom, and even worn on lanyards around staff members' necks. When integrated properly, a pressed panic button can automatically alert law enforcement and other predetermined security personnel, allowing for quick response. There are different types of systems from which to choose. As part of the design process, school security should collaborate with other security officials, local law enforcement and solution providers to choose one that meets the needs of the school and integrates with other systems as needed.

7 **Institutional-grade products.** School environments are subject to high levels of wear-and-tear and it's important to make investments in products and solutions that are built to withstand abuse. Properly functioning openings are key to successful security management. Every opening should be built with institutional-grade doors, frames and door hardware. A patented key system and impact-resistant glass or glass film should also be used. These solutions should integrate (as needed) with the access management system to accomplish overall goals.

8 **Secured points of entry at all times.** Unsecured doors have the potential to allow two types of events to occur unnoticed—either an uninvited guest entering or a student exiting. Often times, an entry point becomes compromised when a teacher or student props it open for the sake of convenience. There are a number of security devices available to ensure that all points of entry are secure at all times while still allowing free egress in the event of an emergency. Sensors are available that alert staff via an audible alarm when a door is not secure and door status switches notify access control or monitoring systems of any issues.

9 **Staff trained on policies, procedures and technologies.** In order for security solutions to perform at their best, school staff must be fully trained on policies, procedures and technologies. Training and drills must be consistent and repetitive—one time is not enough to ensure proper execution during a real emergency.

Although the rates are falling, there is a still a great deal of work that needs to be done. School administrators, parents and teachers are all relying on architects, integrators and security consultants to work together to provide the solutions and training that are essential to providing a positive, safe learning environment for future generations of students.

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