

School Security

Securing the Schoolyard

By Michael A. Gips

Cameras are rolling in schoolhouses across the nation, not just in the hands of students with dreams of Hollywood, but also in security monitoring locations, protecting students, faculty, and school property from harm.

Carolyn Foster, a business teacher in Lynnville, Tennessee, was fifty-eight when it happened to her. Quentin Gamble was a senior at a vocational school in Queens, New York. Dale Breitlow was a forty-six-year-old assistant principal at Wauwatosa West High School in Wisconsin. Steven Watkins, nineteen, was a special education student in Detroit. Jeremy Bullock, an eleven-year-old, was attending Margaret Leary Elementary School in Butte, Montana. Peter Christopher was a forty-one-year old custodian at Wickliffe Middle School, Wickliffe, Ohio.

What could such seemingly disparate people have in common? They were all gunned down on school property--just a few of the more than one hundred lives lost to violent incidents in schools over the last five years.

The nation's schools, in an effort to shelter children from the societal forces that buffet them, are waging a daily battle against crime. It is an uphill fight. Eighty-two percent of the 720 school districts responding to a 1994 National School Boards Association survey reported an increase in violence over the previous five years. But security technology, in combination with creative policies, is helping schools gain ground.

Some schools now require all students, faculty, and staff to wear picture IDs. The number of access points are being limited and entrances are being monitored. In addition, more schools are using metal detectors, says Robert Rusting, editor and publisher of the newsletter *School Security Report*.

Ronald Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center (NSSC)--a partnership of the departments of Justice and Education that promotes safe schools--says that school systems in Long Beach and Oakland, California, and elsewhere have been requiring students to wear uniforms. "Kids tend to behave the way they're dressed," he says.

Schools are also forging partnerships with court officials, probation officers, and other professionals. Court officials provide administrators with information on convicted criminals returning to school, and probation officers are invited to monitor their charges on campus.

Video surveillance is another security solution being adapted to the public school environment--and the results are encouraging. CCTV installations in conjunction with other security measures have led to a significant drop in fights and violent crime, according to some of the schools interviewed for this article. School officials around the country also credit CCTV surveillance with significantly reducing property crime such as break-ins, theft, and vandalism.

Farragut High School on Chicago's West Side experienced about 100 fights per year--sometimes four or five per day--before installing CCTV equipment and metal detectors, adding security officers, and establishing a dress code to eliminate gang attire. In the year since these measures were put in place only three fights have occurred, according to Frank Valadez, the school's administrator. Other violence, such as stabbings, has also disappeared.

In addition, the school went from frequent problems with theft to seeing locker break-ins, vandalism, and other minor crimes cease almost entirely. Painting over graffiti, which in the past had cost \$35,000 per year, cost only about \$2,000 for the first half of the current school year. The dollars saved have been redirected to school beautification projects.

The school had been losing students to other institutions for several years. Now enrollment at Farragut is up 700 students from last year--to about 2,300--which Valadez largely credits to the parents' perception of a safer environment.

Similarly, after installing CCTV monitors at Independence High in Columbus, Ohio, officials saw break-ins drop from ten to zero over two comparable six month periods--one preceding the installation and the other following it.

From 1986 through 1995, the Huntsville, Alabama, school system has used an elaborate microwave-based camera surveillance setup for its more than forty schools. "Prior to our system going online, we were experiencing anywhere from ten to thirty burglaries per month," says Operations Director Don Sadler. "Now we might have five a year, and we have about a 99 percent apprehension rate."

Sadler explains that the Huntsville security system was installed "to protect the facilities after hours because we were losing so much money in fire, theft, and vandalism." In the five years prior to installation, he says, the school system suffered \$6 million worth of such losses. In the years since, losses have been "little, if any." In addition, as a result of the reduction in crime, the school's insurance premiums declined significantly, yielding savings of \$700,000 in the first two years alone.

The number and location of cameras used by schools varies depending on the availability of resources and the nature of the problems. In the Renton School District in Washington State, where violent crime is low and the major concerns are car prowls, trespassing, drug dealing, and graffiti, three high schools have four cameras each. The cameras monitor parking lots and the school exterior.

In Clark County, Nevada, where schools range from rural to inner-city and problems run the gamut, two cameras are used at elementary schools while up to ten are used at secondary schools. Despite severe budget constraints, twenty high schools in Prince

Georges County, Maryland, are wired to support twenty cameras each. Euclid High School, outside Cleveland, now uses more than thirty surveillance cameras to watch its 2,000 students.

The recently opened Townview Magnet Center in Dallas uses thirty-seven cameras for its approximately 2,200 pupils. And the Norfolk school system tries to limit its schools to sixteen cameras, because additional cameras would require the purchase of more multiplexers and other related equipment.

The Clark County School District supplements its stationary surveillance cameras with handheld video recorders. The school police department's gang unit carries the portable cameras to capture gang fights among students on film. School officials can then show the videos to parents to help convince them that their children are involved in gangs, explains Dr. Jack Lazzarotto, the district's director of school police services. Further, Lazzarotto says, Clark County has successfully used CCTV videotapes in court to prosecute individuals caught breaking the law on school property. And Valadez says Farragut has twice used videotapes from stationary cameras to prosecute students who broke into lockers.

CCTV is particularly well suited to schools because of the captive population: the same students, faculty, and staff are there every day, making identification, apprehension, and punishment more likely than in an environment with an ever changing population, such as a convenience store.

But cameras have their limitations. Henri Bérubé, a constable with the Peel Regional Police in Brampton, Ontario, cites studies showing that unmonitored cameras are one of the least effective deterrents to robberies in banks and convenience stores. And he notes that the presence of expensive and easily removed computer equipment is making schools more attractive to professional burglars. He questions whether over time unmonitored CCTV will deter these types of burglaries on school properties.

Legal concerns.

While the use of CCTV equipment in schools could eventually raise concerns over privacy rights, the policies have thus far not encountered concerted opposition. But some attorneys see the potential for legal problems.

"Surveillance at a government school, depending on the nature of the surveillance, is a search and seizure," says Don Haines, legislative counsel specializing in privacy issues for the national office of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). As such, it would require particularized evidence of a crime by a specific person.

Moreover, he says, surveillance can infringe on the rights of students (as well as faculty and staff) to association and free speech. An example would be school administrators monitoring student missionaries or activists whose messages they oppose. Additional concerns arise if the surveillance is recorded and kept, he says.

"But it's not the ACLU's position that in every single conceivable instance the use of video camera surveillance is a bad idea, bad policy, or unconstitutional," Haines clarifies.

Video surveillance may be warranted in cases where there is an immediate threat to public safety or assets, he says, but it would have to be narrowly tailored.

For example, it may be unobjectionable to train a camera directly on an office safe where few people pass by, but only if there is no audio, the transmissions aren't recorded, there is careful control of who monitors it, and notice is given, he says.

Other attorneys say that video surveillance of public areas is not an invasion of privacy where any given person's actions can be expected to be seen by many people anyway.

A more obvious potential infringement occurs with surveillance in areas where students have a clear expectation of privacy. Attorneys point out that surveillance that intrudes upon a bathroom or locker room may well give rise to invasion of privacy claims.

Of the schools surveyed for this article, many used outdoor cameras to monitor entranceways and parking lots, as well as indoor cameras for common areas such as hallways, stairwells, and cafeterias. No cameras were in use in private areas such as locker rooms and bathrooms. The NSSC's Stephens says that he has not seen many cameras in use in school classrooms, except to monitor students on detention or particularly disruptive students.

In schools where access control is a concern, as at Norfolk elementary schools, cameras are placed at entrances. Clark County's Lazzarotto stresses that the camera placement decision should be made with the help of security, teachers, administrators, and technical experts. For example, security may know where fights tend to break out, teachers and administrators may know where students loiter, smoke, or drink alcohol, and technicians can assess the feasibility of camera use at a particular location. Philadelphia's Martin Luther King High School took this approach one step further by giving students a say in camera placement.

Oregon's Centennial School District, which has had little violent crime but significant vandalism, relocates cameras in response to security needs. According to Carol Thornberry, a Centennial administrative assistant, most cameras are posted at the district high school, but portable units can also be placed at trouble spots in the middle school or any of the five elementary schools if circumstances require. Thornberry says this system has been effective in catching and deterring criminals and unruly students.

Signs. Signs apprising students of video surveillance are not legally necessary, according to Jon Groussman, an attorney with Liability Consultants Inc. of Framingham, Massachusetts, as long as cameras are placed in areas where there is no expectation of privacy. However, he adds, if signs are posted, they should be accurate; for example, they should indicate that the surveillance is monitored only if it is indeed monitored.

Norfolk schools do not post signs indicating that surveillance is taking place, because cameras are used only in "public" areas, according to Dr. Barry Hylton, head of security for the Norfolk Public School System. Students, faculty, staff, and parents should be informed when the systems go in, he says, but he does not feel the need for posted warnings.

Placebo cameras. Some schools use dummy cameras to give passersby the impression that they are under surveillance when, in fact, they are not. Administrators at these schools claim that dummy cameras provide the same deterrence at much less cost.

Attorneys, however, warn that this practice creates liability. The risk is that a student will be attacked or injured in range of what appears to be a functional camera but is not. Groussman argues that fake cameras give the impression of security when none is present. A plaintiff threatened or attacked in range of a camera, he says, could contend that he or she reasonably expected school security to respond. Schools that use bogus cameras, he says, are "rolling the dice."

Student attitudes.

The NSSC's Stephens says that student reaction to surveillance has been positive, especially when administrators present surveillance as a safety issue. Stephens stresses the importance of explaining to students, parents, and faculty why cameras are necessary. To minimize disruption, he suggests installing cameras before a new school year starts rather than midyear.

Clark County's Lazzarotto has conducted interviews with students to assess their perceptions of the cameras. For the most part, he says, they are enthusiastic about them and feel safer in school, which in turn improves the learning environment.

According to John J. McLees, executive director for school safety, School District of Philadelphia, installation of CCTV at Martin Luther King High School--just days after a teacher was raped there--has been "greeted with open arms" by students and faculty.

In fact, students and teachers at some schools have been clamoring for surveillance cameras and other measures to help make their environment safer. According to Russ Tedesco, director of security services for Prince Georges County (Maryland) Schools, days after a classmate was shot and killed in late December 1995, a group of students at Maryland's Oxon Hill High School protested the school's lax security.

Some students at a few schools have objected to video surveillance as "Orwellian." According to *Capital Times*, a Madison, Wisconsin, newspaper, students at Middleton High objected when their campus paper reported the use of a covert surveillance camera in the boys locker room. The new principal reportedly credited a prior administration with the installation and immediately had the camera removed.

Students have also bristled at other measures. For example, according to a December 1995 story in the *Boston Globe*, students at Somerville High School, just outside of Boston, resent having to wear photo ID badges. But Robert Snow, district administrator for curriculum and instruction for Somerville Public Schools, says that this sentiment is not widespread and that the school council has voted to retain the badge policy. Tedesco reports similar hostility to ID badges among some students at Prince Georges County schools.

Expense.

Schools intent on installing CCTV equipment may have avoided legal challenges and student opposition, but one battle they must all fight is the one for scarce fiscal resources.

The purchase of surveillance equipment further strains notoriously paltry school budgets. For example, Independence High spent about \$23,000 for twelve black and white cameras, two monitors, a VCR, and a multiplexer. The school is paying for the system on a five year lease-purchase agreement.

Of course, the more elaborate the system the higher the cost. Huntsville's microwave-based security system cost \$1.7 million to install and required licensing by the Federal Communications Commission. To improve quality and escape transmission and regulatory hassles, the school district has recently replaced its microwave system with an Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN), a system that has three channels that can be used to send video, data, and voice transmissions simultaneously. Communications links for the security system, including hardware and software, cost about \$150,000.

A much cheaper solution is to use hand-held cameras, but they cost man-hours and may expose operators to attack.

The use of color cameras in lieu of black and white also increases costs. But color cameras may be worthwhile because of their effectiveness in identifying the color of clothing, skin tone, and any objects a student may be carrying. Fred Zagurski, CPP, an Edmonds, Washington, security consultant who helped the Renton school district design and install its surveillance system, advocates using color cameras indoors and black and white cameras outside, since black and white cameras operate in a wider range of lighting.

Systems have ongoing maintenance and personnel costs as well. Hardware alone is not enough, says Norfolk's Hylton. Sufficient and appropriate personnel must be hired to work with it, a further expense.

Safety is probably the primary motivating factor for funneling limited school dollars in this direction, but school officials can also point to the savings from protecting property as proof that the system ultimately pays for itself. As mentioned earlier, savings can be significant both in property saved from theft and vandalism and in smaller insurance premiums.

As evidence mounts that CCTV helps reduce crime and save money, schools are becoming less camera shy. "Video cameras are a part of life, in the bank, in the grocery stores, in the malls, everywhere," says James Osborne of Columbus's Independence High. "Why should it be any different at a schoolhouse?"

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