

Hard Lessons in School Security

By J. Barry Hylton & Kenneth S. Trump

About half of the high school students recently polled by the Public Agenda Foundation said violence and drugs were serious problems in their schools. Twenty-nine percent of students polled by Educational Communications, Inc., last year said that they knew someone who had brought a weapon to school. While few people would dispute the need for school security, the appropriate nature of its efforts is the subject of vigorous debate. In this pair of articles, the authors--while agreeing on the need for some security standards--present differing views about how security operations should be structured.

Although public schools today face gang violence, drug activities, and other societal problems that threaten both the welfare of the students and their ability to learn, schools have yet to take a systematic approach to security. While some school districts have developed and implemented quality school security programs, such districts are the exception. Overall, the public school sector, when compared to other sectors such as hospitals, airports, and corporate offices, lags far behind in the willingness of its leaders to accept and implement even basic professional security strategies. Progress will not be made until school administrators clearly define security goals and accept security as a professional discipline on a par with their own.

History lesson.

Traditionally, school facilities have been characterized as easily accessible, open to anyone seeking access. The historical absence of security threats facilitated this culture of openness, which schools have been reluctant to abandon even in the face of changing circumstances.

In addition, security has traditionally been treated not as a separate and respected discipline but as an ancillary duty that could be handled by anyone with free time. Thus, teachers "policed" hallways when not in the classroom, and principals provided the "last line of defense" in the form of disciplinary action or, in the worst case scenario, by calling parents or the police.

As security threats and incidents increased, along with the number of classes to be taught in a workday, schools brought in teachers' aides, attendance officers, hall monitors, and others to support the regular staff by monitoring the rest rooms and hallways, checking passes, supervising students in common areas, and escorting unruly students to the office.

Generally, these "hall guards" were also assigned a variety of nonsecurity responsibilities and tasks and were employed under jobs with broad descriptions and few education or skill requirements. In addition, these employees were typically poorly paid and given little or no training in dealing with violent youths or serious security threats.

This approach to safety at our public learning institutions began to change in the 1980s and 1990s when some schools established security departments in response to increased student aggression, the presence of drugs and weapons, gangs, "stranger danger," and other threats. But even with the growing consensus that safety was an important issue, security efforts suffered from misconceptions about security, a lack of oversight, low standards, poor follow-through, underreporting of incidents, and other problems. These problems continue to stand in the way of effective school security to this day.

Misconceptions. School administrators have tended to construe security in broad social terms. For example, rather than target their resources toward traditional security elements, such as access control, many school officials have focused limited time and money on improving school safety through a violence prevention curriculum, enhanced intervention services for "at-risk" students, and stronger discipline. These programs do support school safety, but alone they do not constitute an effective school security program.

Poor oversight. Where traditional security measures have been implemented at schools, they have not been carried out as part of a coherent plan, nor have they been maintained procedurally with consistent follow-through. For example, high-risk schools have installed security equipment, such as surveillance cameras or metal detectors, posted signage, and attempted to reduce access, but these efforts have been haphazard, rather than part of a well-conceived and comprehensive security plan.

Low standards. A good number of districts have also initiated or increased the number of hall monitors, some renaming these monitors "security officers" and creating districtwide "safety and security departments." The personnel assigned to perform security functions at the building level still, however, generally have generic job descriptions and are poorly paid, inadequately trained, and inadequately and inconsistently supervised by nonsecurity professionals.

Even when a school or district has a security director, he or she may find it difficult to supervise staff effectively, because building principals and other educational administrators are typically given direct authority and control of on-site security personnel.

Poor follow-through. While school systems have enacted new policies focused on school security threats, such as weapons, drugs, and gangs, these policies are frequently not translated into consistently followed procedures. In addition, crisis preparedness plans or emergency procedure manuals are now in many schools, yet few have tested or exercised the plans.

In many cases, school personnel are unfamiliar with the basic guidelines outlined in contingency plans and do not even know where to locate the manuals. Training on school security issues is often limited to one-time faculty meeting presentations or, at best, one-day professional in-service sessions that are often offered to the faculty on a volunteer basis along with a range of other optional education programs.

Similarly, access control measures, even when addressed, are inconsistently enforced. Recent news stories have shown, for example, that in spite of signage and visitor policies, strangers can easily gain access to many public schools and walk endlessly without being challenged, even by school administrators and security officials.

One reporter carried a hidden camera and walked through an entire public middle school completely unstopped and unquestioned just three months after an intruder killed a custodian and shot a policeman in the same suburban school. The school subsequently addressed the shortfall in access security by installing card readers at entrances, rather than tackling the larger security issues. That school and many others make the costly mistake of beginning to address security only after an extreme event occurs--and sometimes not even then.

Underreporting of incidents. Another basic component of professional security programs, incident reporting, is grossly inadequate in public schools. Many image-conscious school board members and administrators intentionally contribute to, rather than correct, the absence of consistent data collection and reporting to law enforcement. They are concerned with creating a pristine image of their schools for parents, community members, and the media--not with the integrity of security statistics.

The undefined and marginally accepted position of security director in the school system's organizational structure also contributes to an environment where employee crimes, like the student crimes, go unreported or are handled administratively to avoid media attention.

This national problem of nonreporting and underreporting of school-based crimes prevents educators, law enforcement officers, security specialists, and others from identifying the true extent of crimes in public schools and, in turn, selecting the most effective prevention, intervention, and enforcement actions necessary to counter the problem.

Other problems. Other basic professional security practices are also absent from most public schools. Inventory control is limited in most districts, and property transfer and removal procedures are nonexistent or are not followed because they are inconvenient. Key control is best summarized by one veteran school security officer who stated, "The kids have keys to more rooms in this school than I do."

Internal security measures are also lacking or are inadequate in most public school systems. Background checks generally consist of limited criminal history checks and rarely involve procedures that security professionals would classify as true background investigations.

This problem is further complicated by the fact that school districts are notorious for allowing employees who commit crimes or unethical acts to resign or retire from their district to avoid public embarrassment to the district. These employees usually leave the district with a good or neutral record and reference, only to show up in another school system in the near future.

Report card.

School officials have made progress with regard to measures that strengthen and support effective security programs. Conflict resolution and peer mediation programs, violence and drug prevention curricula, and partnerships with law enforcement and the community have improved significantly in the past five to ten years. But despite the benefits of these strategies, comprehensive and professional security programs have been only marginally enhanced, at best. A new school of thought is called for.

Making the grade.

If school leaders are serious about establishing and maintaining safe schools, two significant changes must occur. First, security must be viewed from a new perspective both politically and administratively. Second, there must be benchmark standards established for public school security.

New perspective. Many school officials claim that if their schools had more funding, they could improve security. Although they might be able to buy more equipment and increase the number of personnel to perform security functions, funding alone would not improve public school security for all of the reasons already discussed. As a precursor to better funding, schools must make security a part of today's educational leaders' reform plans for school operations.

This change in attitude will not be easy because education and security are not natural fits. Educators and security professionals must work together to establish mutually beneficial relations, much as educators and law enforcement officials have in the past.

These adjustments in attitude must be accompanied by structural adjustments. No longer should security come under the maintenance division. Professional security must be integrated into the organizational structure and the organizational culture of public schools.

School security must be organized, structured, funded, supported, and accepted as a professional support service, just as school law, finance, business, transportation, student services, and related departments have been. Additionally, security directors must have the authority to select, train, supervise, and fire the school's security personnel.

Educators must also accept the need for greater disclosure with regard to incident reporting. They must institutionalize a new culture of openness and trust based on the consistent reporting of school crimes and the implementation of professional school security standards.

Benchmarking. School administrators and security professionals must develop goals by setting at least some rudimentary benchmark standards. Standards would serve to focus staff attention and resources toward consistent objectives. Standards would also provide the public with a more rational tool for analyzing school security and, by doing so, would likely reduce some of the overly dramatic coverage of school security issues by the media.

A critical element of any school security standard must be the implementation of compulsory reporting of criminal incidents. Mandatory crime reporting laws should be established nationally to ensure the consistent reporting of all school-based criminal activity and the use of resulting data for developing prevention, intervention, and enforcement strategies and programs.

In addition, schools need to develop professional qualifications for front-line and management security personnel, including minimum requirements for education, experience, and training and reasonable standards for pay and benefits. Schools should also develop guidelines for hiring, training, supervising, evaluating, and firing security staff under the supervision of a centralized school security professional.

A thorough background check should be mandatory for all new-employees. Similarly, if outside security consultants or trainers will be hired on a contract basis, they should be required to meet established standards.

Security guidelines should include the mission of the school security unit, a definition of primary functions and services to be performed, and guidelines for handling internal crimes and related incidents with safeguards built in to protect school security personnel from political and administrative retaliation.

The standards or guidelines should require that every school first undergo a security survey and threat assessment, after which a written security plan should be developed that addresses crisis preparedness, physical security, asset protection and loss prevention, security education, and training.

The plan should be coordinated with prevention and intervention programs. The security director should be responsible for overseeing the plan's development and implementation. He or she should have the authority to ensure that the plan is carried out, with the ability to require awareness training and drills where needed, to take enforcement measures, and to ensure that the plan is kept up to date.

Every school is unique, and each school must, of course, have the flexibility to adapt its security program to its unique security issues and needs. Still, general guidelines that can serve as the foundation for comparison, discussion, and planning must be generated in the near future if public school security is to be truly professionalized.

Failure to identify and professionally implement such standards will expose schools to costly lawsuits for inadequate security--but worse, it will leave children and school employees vulnerable to dangers from which they could likely be protected. If, however, administrators come to terms with the need for reasonable security guidelines, combined with a recognition that security must be a respected partner within the educational hierarchy, they may ultimately earn a security grade that they can show to parents with pride.

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