

School Security: Establishing A Reasonable Level of Security in Schools

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The following general considerations and tips were prepared by Roger H. Schmedlen, CPP, CFE, CII, MIPI, a security consultant at Loss Prevention Concepts, Ltd. who has frequently been employed as an expert witness in security/loss control negligence and premises liability matters.

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Historically, except in high crime areas, there has been little reason for concern with security in schools, other than establishing countermeasures for traditional risks such as fire and natural disasters. However, in recent years, adverse high profile events occurring in schools has significantly increased the awareness of other risks which may exist in these environments--and dramatically highlighted the intensified exposure to security related premises liability litigation.

In most cases, schools do not offer exceptional risk and there is no need to consider initiating increased levels of security that would be appropriate in high risk facilities. Security at schools would be considered adequate when it is reasonable and appropriate for the environment. In most cases, property perimeter barriers, enforced wearer identification, metal detectors and removal of shrubbery--countemeasures which might be appropriate in high risk industrial settings--are unnecessary at typical educational facilities.

The following are some considerations for ensuring reasonable security at schools and educational facilities in the United States:

District Policies

Every school district should have a published Crisis Management Plan that is fully understood by all principals and administrators. In many states, State Safety Standards or recommendations are available. In most cases, if such standards exist, they should be incorporated into the Crisis Management Plan. By adopting accepted industry standards, districts minimize exposure to litigation, as well as improving the odds of successfully dealing with a crisis.

Occasionally outside domestic situations arise which result in immediate temporary risk to students. For instance, a parent of a student may call in to advise that an estranged spouse has threatened to go to the school and remove their child--or attempt a domestic kidnapping. Particularly in elementary schools, middle schools and junior high schools, there should be a method for administrative personnel to communicate an immediate "lockdown" order to all

teachers and staff. Often a discreetly-coded low key announcement on the school's public address system is the easiest way to order this action. ("Mr. Jones is now in the building," or "All teachers will be expected to attend the domestic review meeting after school," etc.) Lockdown policies should be written policies.

It is highly recommended that a workplace violence preparedness program be considered, since this hazard is increasing in all work environments and today the single highest cause of death in the workplace for females in the U. S. is homicide. Specifically, it is recommended that in the event of a possibility of spillover domestic violence involving a teacher or employee working in schools, the at-risk employee be placed on leave and removed from the school until the exposure has passed, thus immediately eliminating risk to students. Policy should require that employees report situations such as this which could increase risk to students.

Some districts have taken the position that schools will be automatically evacuated in the event of a bomb threat. This is not necessarily the correct approach in schools--or for that matter in any work environment. A decision regarding evacuation should always be made based on the information known and therefore it is imperative that persons who would be in a position to take such a call have the knowledge and ability to properly handle the caller. Assuming that access control at a school is reasonable and the threat is not a hoax, it is probable the explosive device would be placed near the building perimeter. Thus, a well-meaning evacuation could have the effect of moving students from areas of relative safety through the high risk blast zone. Obviously, it is beneficial to have caller identification capabilities on telephone systems where this is possible.

Another policy which should be reviewed is any procedure regarding property access by suspended students. While some districts bar suspended students from the buildings, they fail to extend this prohibition to the campuses and property. Especially in situations where suspension involved illegal substances or violence, this allowable property access can provide risk to students while preventing police from initiating trespass charges.

Some districts engage in what is often termed "mainstreaming". These programs integrate youths with a predictable potential for violence, disruption and similar problems into regular classroom programs with run-of-the-mill students who do not have any known problems. While, perhaps, politically correct in today's atmosphere, experiments in social engineering of this nature are unrealistic, present an obvious hazard to students who have no problems, and would seem unfair to the more challenged youths, since regular teaching staff would not be adequately trained in handling their special needs.

Security Awareness

The single most effective component of any security program is the countermeasure which costs nothing--a high level of security awareness on the part of all employees. However, teachers often comprise the hardest group to sell on the benefits of accepting a responsible role in security. In some cases, their attitude may be that personally approaching--or even reporting--an unknown person in the school is not their job. Some teachers, however, seem to live in their own abstract worlds and fail to recognize the risks that exist today in the real world. If a school principal has a cavalier attitude toward security, this has a significant negative impact on the teachers and staff. The most effective way to increase the level of security awareness among teachers and staff is to ensure that principals actively promote good security and strongly support those who take proper actions, while refusing to allow anyone to circumvent security controls for the sake of convenience.

Staff Identification

Unlike large businesses, the number of adults employed in most schools is typically quite low and staff is normally able to identify all other employees (and often all students) by personal recognition. Therefore, in most cases, consistent enforced wearer identification by staff is not usually necessary. However, wearer identification should be required for all authorized visitors, both adults and unaccompanied minors. When this is a consistent policy, it is an easy matter for teachers and staff to readily identify (and approach or report) intruders or unauthorized persons observed in the building.

Most schools have intrusion detection and fire alarm systems appropriate for their environments. However, additionally, duress alarms are highly recommended for school offices, so that assistance can be obtained discreetly in the event an adverse situation develops. Response can be by public sector law enforcement or school maintenance workers--or ideally the option for either, or both.

Most schools have no property perimeter barriers, nor are such barriers normally appropriate or even desirable. Additionally, many campuses contain landscaping elements which would provide places of concealment for intruders. While shrubbery and other appealing visual obstructions should be removed from high risk facilities, they generally offer limited and acceptable risk in typical school environments.

In most schools, after classes are in session, building access is limited (or should be) to one or two doors. However, in many cases, these entrances cannot be observed by administrative staff members. There are many ways to inexpensively minimize this exposure. CCTV is usually the most cost effective.

When school buildings are used for after hours activities such as community

education, it makes sense to have the ability to restrict access to other areas of the building. Usually the most convenient method for handling this internal control is by utilizing portable "rolling" gates, which can be locked into place in different areas of the buildings. In all cases, a designated group leader should be held contractually responsible for the activities and control of his or her group.

Keyed lock systems have many vulnerabilities, particularly in large districts. Microprocessing card access systems can often provide long term savings, while significantly improving access control and accountability. Relatively high priced biometric access control systems offer no real advantage in these environments.

Whether or not external CCTV systems are warranted depends on the event history at the school, crime statistics and community standards. When justified, such systems should include high resolution color cameras capable of providing identifiable images throughout the darkness hours. Prominently placed signs indicating the presence of such systems can have a deterrent effect, but under no circumstances should such signs be placed when a CCTV system does not exist. (Likewise, simulated cameras or "replicas" should never be used.)

Although there is seldom a justification for permanent internal CCTV systems in elementary schools, in many junior high and high schools these systems may be warranted. While this can be a hard sell because of the perception that such monitoring is intrusive, objections can normally be overcome by stressing the rationale that the system is for the safety and protection of students. Internal CCTV systems should only be considered when justified by historic events or when problems are foreseeable. Additionally, districts should have the ability to install temporary clandestine CCTV units to counter temporary security problems, such as a rash of vandalism or increased theft from students' lockers. Obviously, CCTV coverage should never include areas where students or others have a reasonable expectation of privacy.

Exterior lighting should always meet minimum standards for security and comply with any local codes. Emergency lighting systems should exist within all school buildings and these systems should be regularly tested.

Security Related Documentation

Although in most districts, maintenance normally conducts an informal check of the school grounds and lights on at least a weekly basis, this is seldom recorded anywhere. By simply documenting these activities in writing and retaining this documentation, accountability is improved and the ability to successfully defend a premises liability lawsuit is substantially increased.

Additionally, it makes sense for a specific district administrator to confirm and prepare a written record of community standards compliance at least twice a year as a diaried project.

Security Personnel & Reporting Structure

In most cases, schools do not employ security officers per se and the line security function is delegated to maintenance workers. Typically the maintenance workers report to the school principal who is responsible for the security of the facility. Frequently, however, principals have no knowledge or background in security and may fail to respond correctly when hazardous situations are reported. For this reason, maintenance personnel handling the security function should have the ability to report such situations to a higher authority when principals fail to respond appropriately.

In some situations, usually only at high schools, full time security officers are present. It seldom makes sense to consider proprietary security officers to fill this role, due to the lack of back up capabilities. For instance, in most cases if a proprietary security officer becomes ill or takes a vacation day, the post will go uncovered. Other problems are usually present with any small in-house security force and a quality contract security service provider is usually the only realistic consideration. Low bid, minimum wage watchman services, which often provide subsidized untrained staff--and can actually increase exposure--should be avoided.

Security Management & Outside Consultants

A specific person at the district administrative level should be designated as being responsible for the overall security of the district facilities. This should not be a shared function, since accountability is always critical in security, but this person should have a backup. Individuals being considered for this position must be highly motivated and report at a high enough level so that decisive action can be taken without excessive delay.

It is advisable that this designated "security director" consider membership in the American Society for Industrial Security International. In addition to attending relevant training courses available through this professional association, this person should be encouraged to become active in the local chapter of this organization. This usually gives this designated "security director" the ability to draw on the wide range of expertise available from experienced security professionals who are often capable of providing advice and recommending solutions to unusual problems.

In many school districts, no one at an administrative level has any background or experience in security and decisions may be made based on the incorrect assumptions shared by the general public.

For this reason, it often makes sense for a district to occasionally obtain input from a competent security consultant or practitioner. Contrary to the assumption

of the general public, police officers normally have no greater knowledge of security than civilians and in most cases are not qualified to consult in this area. (However, specific recommendations of youth officers or police officers assigned to high schools, in my experience, have always been valid, logical and appropriate.) When considering outside input, only security consultants who are Certified Protection Professionals should be considered. The CPP designation in security is comparable to the CPA certification in accounting and is the only universally recognized professional credential in security.

Independent security surveys conducted by outside security consultants can significantly reduce risk at district facilities. Often, excessive exposure exists in schools simply because of unrealistic political correctness, community relations concerns and the naive outlook of school board members in districts which have never suffered a disaster or faced a crisis. The written security survey/risk analysis report of a professional security practitioner and the valid considerations contained therein cannot usually be ignored by these folks. Particularly in cases where principals, maintenance departments and administrators have recognized the risk and are frustrated by their inability to minimize the exposure, independent security surveys can prove to be convincing documents.

Independent security surveys can also provide an exceptional benefit in the event of future adverse premises liability litigation, assuming that reasonable corrective action recommended in the reports has been taken.

However, it is strongly recommended that gratis "security surveys" frequently available through contract security service providers and other vendors be avoided. These projects are usually not true professional security surveys or unbiased risk analyses, but promotional gambits which can actually increase liability.

For instance if the "security survey" report of a sales driven security service provider recommended six full-time officers at a high school, but a reasonable level of security would exist with two, the district would presumably ignore the self-serving recommendation and assign only two officers. However, should an adverse event occur in the future, a competent plaintiff attorney would likely discover the existence of the spurious survey and allege the district was negligent because after requesting a security analyses from a "security professional," the district knowingly failed to provide the necessary coverage recommended.

Unforeseeable Events

Atrocities such as the Columbine and Virginia Tech massacres may suggest to some that mass murders in schools is a new phenomenon. This is an incorrect assumption. Similar events have taken place on occasion throughout history with the greatest number of deaths in a school massacre in the U.S. occurring

over 80 years ago. On May 18, 1927, a disgruntled school board member, Andrew Kehoe, detonated hundreds of pounds of pyrotol and dynamite he had secluded in a new school building in the small village of Bath, Michigan. His motive was revenge for the increase in property taxes required to pay for the new school, which contributed to the impending foreclosure of his farm. His actions resulted in the death of 44 people, 37 of whom were school children.. Kehoe had also murdered his wife just prior to the detonations and an additional 58 persons, mostly children, were injured in the explosions.

Events such as these may well be unforeseeable. However, by ensuring that an ongoing high level of security awareness exists--and preventing unrealistic political correctness from taking the place of logic and good sense--warning signs may be detected in advance and a potential disaster might be averted. Additionally, by providing a means for students and others to anonymously report potential risks, for instance establishing a Tip Line, students with knowledge or suspicions of a plot, but who do not want to be identified, may be encouraged to provide a warning. Obviously, there must be accountability, motivation and the ability to quickly investigate such warnings.

The Greatest Challenge to District Administration

School districts have the responsibility for providing a reasonably safe and secure environment for students and staff and are negligent in performing this duty when failing to take action to prevent foreseeable adverse events. However, in most cases, the greatest challenge to a district may exist in convincing teachers and staff not to prop open doors or otherwise circumvent existing controls, to question or report unknown persons observed in the schools, to respond to valid concerns reported by maintenance staff and to increase their personal level of security awareness.

The author of this article has 40 years field experience as a security consultant & international investigator and has conducted several security surveys of educational facilities.

Questions on this subject? Write the author at expert@LPOnline.com

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