

Creating Balance with Basic School Security Measures

District leaders can implement basic security measures that balance safety with a welcoming school environment.

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Shootings in school districts across the country have left school leaders with concerns regarding their ability to ensure the safety of students and staff members. Although it is impossible to plan for all contingencies, several measures can help district leaders maintain safe, healthy, and productive educational facilities. The goal is to balance security with an attractive and welcoming school environment.

General Assessments

Perform a security assessment as part of the district's annual facilities checklist and comprehensive long-range facilities planning process. This assessment should include fire, smoke, and carbon monoxide alarms and equipment. Including local first responders in these security assessment procedures can ensure that communication and emergency response protocols are in place.

The specifics of emergency and security plans should *not* be made available to the general public. However, districts should publicize that they have worked collaboratively with community agencies to evaluate, investigate, and initiate security procedures and protocols to maintain the safety of students and staff members.

Exterior Measures

The perceived difficulty of conducting a criminal act promotes deterrence. Keep school grounds organized and well maintained and implement “obstacles” to crime.

- Clearly direct visitors to an identifiable main entrance. Provide signs that indicate where visitors are allowed and where they are prohibited.
- Ensure clear sight lines by maintaining buildings, landscaping, and lighting. Trim trees and shrubbery to eliminate hiding places.
- Provide fencing that limits access while allowing proper egress. Fence off areas that may create niches and blind spots.
- Ensure that “outbuildings,” such as field houses and modular units, have adequate fencing and connections to main buildings.
- Make sure that campus lighting is uniform. Eliminate shadows or glare. Lighting should enhance visibility, discourage trespassing, and prevent school vandalism.

Site-Based Activities

Consider the activities that happen on and around school campuses, including vehicular and pedestrian movement, traffic and crosswalk activity, and gathering areas that may make staff and students vulnerable to risk.

Each school should have mandatory, consistent, and secure drop-off and pick-up procedures that are enforced by highly visible staff members in halls and on the grounds during arrival and dismissal. Additional measures will help safeguard students and staff members:

- Use traffic control devices such as stop signs and speed bumps or dips. Intentional or accidental high-speed vehicle approaches can be deterred by bollards and concrete planters. Boulders and earth berms can offer more aesthetically pleasing barriers.
- Ensure that buses can drop off and pick up students directly from a designated, marked loading and unloading zone near a supervised school entrance.
- Ensure parent drop-off and pick-up zones are clearly designated and separated from bus traffic.
- Clearly mark parking spaces for visitors, students, and staff members, and separate those parking areas, if possible. Require parking decals to identify unauthorized vehicles easily.
- Maintain space for emergency vehicle access and evacuation of buildings, play areas, and fields.

Building Envelope Security

Most districts have established security measures to control building access at the main entrance; however, the entire building envelope must be hardened to eliminate unauthorized entry. Hardening includes securing air intake openings and installing a master shutoff for the school ventilation system. Those are two low cost–high impact preventive measures that promote building security. Additional actions can help secure the building:

- Limit the number of entry points.
- Use technology integration for keyless entry.
- Always lock exterior mechanical equipment and other utility enclosures.
- Restrict roof access by eliminating any potential climbing points. Secure roof hatches.
- Protect basement windows with security screens or window well covers.
- Place trash containers and dumpsters away from buildings.

Including local first responders in these security assessment procedures can ensure that communication and emergency response protocols are in place.

Many schools number their exterior doors and windows. The Center for Safe Schools (www.SafeSchools.info) suggests that the front of the building be labeled “side A,” and the main entrance should always be designated as No. 1, with other sides and doors labeled clockwise in sequential order. Use reflective Arabic numerals for exterior numbers so they are clearly visible from the street or closest driveway.

Interior Measures

Provide one designated entrance into a secure vestibule where visitors’ identities can be checked before they enter the building. Beyond that main entrance, districts can improve security within schools in several ways:

- Relocate fire alarm pull stations so they are not in the secure vestibules where unauthorized people can access them.
- Install ballistic or shatter-resistant glass during construction or renovation projects.
- Install ballistic or shatter-resistant film to windows that are considered vulnerable—often the entry or first-floor areas.



- Consider lanyard-type visitor passes instead of stickers, which can fall off.
- Store visitor passes behind counters and put processes in place to ensure that they are returned or voided upon sign-out or expiration.
- Separate areas that are available to the community after school hours—such as gyms, auditoriums, or meeting rooms—with gates or other barriers.
- Provide supervision vantage points. Monitor large areas of hallways and classroom entrances from one point (security station). Divide the building into wings and floors to properly manage supervision and security. An easy, inexpensive way to differentiate areas is to color-code them.
- Use vision panels to create visual connections between spaces for better supervision.
- Create refuge areas (havens) in classrooms where occupants can gather out of view of the corridor. Distinct floor patterns can indicate a safe zone within each classroom. Younger students can be instructed to gather in safe areas.
- Equip classrooms with keyless door-locking systems and shading devices on hallway and exterior glazed areas.
- Number classrooms for easy identification during an emergency. Post numbers in the hallways, on the building exterior, and in the classrooms.

After Hours and School Visitation

School security does not end with the final bell. Schools today have seen a marked increase in facility use at night and on weekends. It's important to use

available technology to protect the facility during these off-hours.

Regarding school visits, an online parent portal allows parents to schedule appointments, student sign-outs, and other visitation activities. Drop-off bins where parents can bring students' forgotten items is another way to limit access—especially for the lower grades. Before moving forward on these types of activities, it's impor-

tant to review the school visitation policies.

In Summary

By initiating a course of “proactive prevention” to identify potential incidents before they occur, district leaders can enhance their overall safety plans. Encourage all students and staff members to be vigilant and to report any evidence of threats or boasts predicting violence—80% of the information related to violent actions comes from students and parents. The STOPit app is one tool that helps students report incidents or get help. Apps like STOPit support the See Something, Say Something campaign.

Although most states provide security training and tools to promote school safety, no widely accepted independent standards are available for school building security. Best practices are specific to each facility.

Security experts recognize that districts cannot plan for all emergencies, but they urge school leaders to implement security plans and procedures that will slow down, deter, and detain school intruders; maximize responsiveness of first responders; and maintain effective communication with authorities during school emergencies.

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