

Prismatic Perspectives

School Safety & Security



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Overview

Safety and security are no less a key element of school management and administration than teaching and learning.

Security is listed in many dictionaries as a synonym for safety. Strangely, safety is more rarely used by these dictionaries as a synonym for security. Perhaps, therefore, safety and security aspects in schools are always identified by these two words rather than only by one or the other.

Safety vs. Security

In PreK-12 parlance we refer to matters of safety primarily when it comes to avoiding accidents which could injure students, faculty, visitors, and administrators during a school day or other special events on weeknights or weekends. When the term security is used, we refer to keeping the school facilities and the people in them safe from surreptitious entry by persons who might vandalize buildings, go on skateboarding joyrides, steal valuable property, or seek to injure or kill its inhabitants.

Safety

Typical safety items in school facilities requiring periodic inspections include playgrounds, athletic facilities, shops (e.g., welding, wood, automotive, pottery) and laboratories, especially chemistry and biology. But: you already know that! What you may not know is that other sources of accidents and injuries in your schools may be less obvious but equally or more important. Among these could be:

- stairs or corridors not meeting building code;
- unlocked electrical panels in public areas;
- electrical or other utility closets hard to access because they are stuffed with surplus furniture, boxes, and other miscellaneous surplus items;
- roof leaks causing slippery puddles and collateral water damage to the building and its contents;
- trapped moisture causing toxic mildew and mold;
- HVAC systems producing contaminated indoor air (watch for black marks on ceiling at air diffuser exhausts); and
- extensive carpeting carrying bacteria and viruses.

School safety never happens by accident.

Safety administration must be tailored to each school because schools tend to be unique in design and configuration. There is no one size fits all safety prescription. Careful analysis is required to identify safety concerns for your school. With one size fits all, you will either forget something or include something superfluous. Responsibility for safety inspections and monitoring must be delegated formally and deliberately. And training for everyone is always an essential element of any safety program. Insurance companies will send experts to identify all safety risks that could impact claims. Safety is all about awareness.

While school safety issues have been a concern for decades, they have become a greater focus of attention since the increase in litigiousness in the United States. Lawsuits for negligence have proliferated.

Security

Issues of security have come to the forefront more recently and with greater relative exposure than safety matters. Decades ago, schools in most parts of the USA were not considered to be likely targets of mass killers. Entrances were not secured. In American schools, small signs at all entrances asked that "All visitors must report to the front office," or words to that effect. A vice principal in charge of "discipline" was typically responsible for enforcing cases of truancy, fighting, the dress code, and any other violations of good behavior found in the student handbook. However, new labels were placed on certain unacceptable forms of behavior during the past two to three decades. Although some pupils have always engaged in domineering conduct, the term or label of "bullying" was used increasingly to define and categorize different types of intimidation. Likewise, as defacement of schools with spray paint became more common, vandalism became a prominent category under the security rubric. In addition to acceptable clothing, dress codes outlawed the wearing of clothes displaying certain profanities, insults, and gang symbols.



Perhaps the biggest changes to school security have been in surveillance and perimeter security. Examples are:

Secure Visitor Check-In at Main Entry. To counteract the unchecked entry of anyone with potentially sinister motives, some schools have now installed secure lobby areas requiring that visitors scan identification (drivers license or other government issued ID) for a database background check before a temporary visitor badge can be issued. This security kiosk is typically at the main school entrance. Metal detection devices, such as those found in airport security areas, are included frequently in such entry areas.

Programmable ID Badges and Electronic Door Locks. In some districts, programmable badges are issued to all persons who are students or employees. Each badge can be programmed from a remote server to access specific doors in the building. For example, principals' badges might permit access to all school areas, while teacher access could be limited to a classroom and ancillary work areas and lounges. Students would be required to scan badges at the front entry and would typically have no programmed door access, since bathrooms have no doors and classrooms are kept unlocked during the school day. In some systems, if a badge is suspected to have been taken forcibly by a person seeking school entry without proper check-in, all badges can be disabled instantly until the stolen badge has been identified.

Surveillance Cameras. In the USA, over seventy percent of schools currently operate surveillance cameras. This is one of the largest increases of all security measures, up from less than twenty percent just a few decades ago. Perhaps an even more significant change has been the improvement in resolution of surveillance cameras. Old, affordable technology yielded images akin to the "Michelin Man." This fuzzy lack of detail made the foolproof identification of individuals a challenge, especially in court. Current technology gathers clear, crisp, detail, permitting solid identification, including excellent night vision in many cases. Proper camera location, collection and safekeeping of video vignettes and images, and the addition or relocation of cameras as needed after construction or renovation, are important maintenance and operations requirements. Camera mounts capable of letting cameras sweep across a dedicated area, and cameras capable of focusing and staying on moving objects as they are discovered are still somewhat costly but helpful in surveillance.



Security Shelters. In Oklahoma and other areas prone to high winds and earth tremors, school districts have for many years built underground shelters or reinforced large assembly structures to serve as safe zones from tornadoes, hailstorms, seismic events, and the collapse of structures from these hazards. More recently, this idea has evolved into a "shelter-in-place" concept as a defense against both weather hazards and active shooter incidents. Such shelters are installed in each classroom and permit students and faculty quick protection. They are designed to offer sufficient space for the students and adults in a given classroom. Manufacturers claim they resist building collapse and the onslaught of bullets. The shelter-in-place concept has not yet been employed on a large scale.

Our research has been unable to confirm that the bullet resistance includes armor piercing ammunition. This is important because armor piercing bullets are by Federal law available to the ordinary U.S. citizen. And attackers tend to rise to challenges such as those presented by shelters made of bullet-proof steel full of students and faculty.

Perimeter Security. Many school properties are fenced and some fences are augmented by surveillance cameras, as well as monitored gates that can be opened with programmable badges. We have on occasion seen where fences have open areas allowing easy entry on the property. In some cases, perimeter fences were designed to exclude perimeter buildings. For example, a high school's shop and greenhouse buildings were left outside of the fenced perimeter, although they could have been included easily in the protective enclosure.

Resources

We offer additional resources to help keep you up-to-date on school safety and security. We urge you to spend at least an hour per month searching under such topics as:

- school safety
- school security
- school safety and security

Or you may want to target your search to these information sources:

- Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) <https://rem.s.ed.gov/>
- National Institute of Justice (<https://www.nij.gov/Pages/welcome.aspx>)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) <https://www.cdc.gov/>
- Indicators of School Crime and Safety (<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators>)

Look also for The School Survey on Crime and Safety and The School Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey.

- Today's Climate of Crime, Safety and Security at Schools, Colleges
- <http://insurancejournal.com/news/national/2017/05/23/451779.htm>

**We hope you found this resource useful!
Don't forget to check out the rest of the Perspectives series.**

**If you have any questions, or if you are interested in learning more about
how Prismatic can help you, please contact us at
info@prismaticservices.com.**

