



Ask The Expert

Seasoned security expert offers advice on helping schools stay secure

By Skip Sampson



ISSUE: What technologies are schools adopting into their current security plans?

SOLUTION: Intrusion detection systems are becoming commonplace from kindergarten through high school. Burglar and fire panels allow for quick after-hours notification of a break-in or smoke or flames on campus.

Many alarm systems now include panic buttons in each classroom to allow teachers and even students to quickly notify the office of an emergency situation, such as a gunman entering the building. In some schools, teachers and students also are using wireless duress alarms, usually worn as pendants. Locator technology then pinpoints the location of the person requesting help so school officials know not only who is in trouble, but where he or she is located.

Some larger districts handle their own monitoring of these alarm devices. Many districts choose to have an outside service provide the monitoring and call law

Access control systems -- using card readers and/or keypads -- are appearing on more campuses. Cards or codes can be changed faster and at less cost than re-keying an entire campus due to lost, stolen or duplicated keys. Also, access systems provide a higher level of security in areas where expensive equipment is located, such as in computer and science labs and audio-visual rooms.

As an added benefit, smart cards also can be used to check out books from the school library or purchase food from the cafeteria.

Surveillance cameras are becoming more commonplace on school campuses. One example is a small urban school district in the Midwest, which has placed more than 750 cameras throughout its two high schools.

Cameras can be programmed to record continuously or only when motion is detected. Many schools prominently display monitors near main entries to let students and visitors know immediately that they are under surveillance. That alone is enough to deter many would-be vandals or other troublemakers. Most schools are using the cameras to monitor hallways, cafeterias, gyms and hidden areas that are attracting problem behaviors.

Analog VCRs are being replaced by DVRs for recording video. DVRs offer faster image retrieval, better image quality and increased storage capability as compared to VCRs. Also, by using e-mail or the Internet, DVRs allow for the sharing of digital video with local law enforcement agencies -- an advantage not possible with videotape.

This means that school administrators, using either the Internet or the school's intranet, can pull up and review images from schools far from the main office. This is a major plus also made possible by the fact that many schools today have the IP infrastructure to carry digital video.

Metal detectors can be a valuable addition to a school's security effort to keep weapons off campus. However, there are several downsides to the use of the technology to consider, including:

- Most schools have multiple entries and posting metal detectors at each could be costly.
- Student arrival times may have to be staggered as metal detectors slow entry onto the campus.
- To be effective, the equipment must be monitored. This takes security personnel away from other duties or requires the hiring of additional staff.

Some districts still view metal detectors as a good investment and choose either a free-standing metal-detection portal, which students walk through upon entering the school grounds, or detection wands that are used for scanning incoming students.

ISSUE: How can school administrators pick the best system?

SOLUTION: Most school districts will be required by law to seek competitive bids before selecting a security systems integrator to handle their systems installation. But, when considering the various proposals, school officials should look for a seasoned integrator with significant technical knowledge and expertise. The best choice is an integrator with previous experience in working with a school system.

Expect the integrator to help determine which technologies are the best fit for its particular challenges. For instance, intrusion alarms won't stop vandalism, but a well-placed surveillance camera might go a long way toward curbing the problem.

Also consider a system's scalability -- that is its ability to grow and expand as needs change. Look for an open architecture system, in which every major system component is designed according to industry standards. This is important because it enables interoperability and integration with equipment made by various manufacturers. Also, do not forget service, support and product warranty. A software support agreement also should include software enhancement updates, as well as software maintenance and firmware updates.

An experienced integrator will help a single school or an entire district get the most protection for the money spent.

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