

Welcome, Visitors

School districts realize the necessity of creating a plan for guests

Go to the Department of Justice's online national sex offender public registry, pick a major city and select an urban – or even suburban – neighborhood. Most likely, there will be anywhere from a few to 40 or more registered sex offenders within walking distance of the neighborhood's public elementary school.

According to the National Alert Registry, there are approximately 500,000 registered sex offenders in the United States. And that only includes those who have been arrested and convicted. There is no reliable count on the total number of potential pedophiles. There also is no way of measuring how many of these people may visit school campuses each day.

THE ON-CAMPUS THREAT

Each day, more than 700 children are reported abducted in the United States, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Most are taken by a relative—often a parent already served with a temporary restraining order during or after a divorce. Sometimes children are taken from school, where a volunteer at the front desk may be unaware of a court order.

Campus thefts are commonplace, and they impact students, staff and the school. On most campuses, it is easy to walk around during the day and determine which rooms contain the most valuable and sellable equipment, such as computers, printers and televisions. In many cases, a person carrying a stolen computer can walk off campus unchallenged – even during normal school hours.

Fires, broken windows, graffiti, super-glued door locks and other acts of vandalism interrupt the education process. Nationwide, school districts spend millions of dollars each year to repair damage caused by vandals.

Allowing students and staff campus access while keeping the bad people out is a challenge that faces virtually all principals, superintendents, board members and school resource officers.

CREATING A PLAN

Every school needs a well-written, rehearsed and enforced visitor management plan as one of the first steps in protecting people and property. A plan should include basic policies and procedures, which generally are inexpensive and easy to implement. There are other simple, low-tech steps that add levels of protection, then there are electronic security solutions that offer a higher level of protection that should be well within financial reach of most schools.

Each school should limit the number of visitors allowed on campus. Many schools allow students to enter the campus from multiple points. Elementary schools, in particular, should have one entry into the campus for students, parents and visitors. High school campuses should limit access to only a few entries. While classes are in session, those entries should be closed and locked to outsiders. Open the entry 30 minutes before the start of school and close it 30 minutes after the last class.

School resource officers and/or administrative staff should monitor access points to see who enters the campus immediately before and after school and during lunch (if students are permitted to leave campus). Permit only known students and volunteers to enter. Direct all other visitors to the office. During school hours, administrators and/or school resource officers should walk around the exterior to verify that the doors are properly closed and secured.

Require all teachers and staff to wear an ID badge at all times. Badges can be issued on a district-wide basis as employees are hired. This also makes it easier for younger children to spot someone they can trust in the event of an emergency.

Require all parents, volunteers, vendors and other visitors to register in the office. All visitors should show a state-issued identification card and provide a home telephone number, reason for being on campus and time of arrival. Staff members should give visitors a temporary ID badge that must be worn on campus at all times. Visitors should check out when leaving and return the badge. Regular parent volunteers also may be issued an ID badge through the district.

Instruct all teachers and staff members to immediately challenge any adult on campus without an identification badge. If the person refuses to leave, contact the police. School officials should make a written record of the school's visitor management plan and give a copy to every teacher and staff member. Discuss and practice it before the start of each school year, and review the plan several times.

Fencing, gates and locks also can close off many potential entries and guide visitors to the correct entry points. Signage can help direct people to the correct entrances and provide information such as office hours and the proper credentials needed to gain access to the campus.

GETTING TECHNICAL

Electronic security products add a higher measure of security. Intercom systems allow visitors to communicate with office personnel while still outside the school. Many systems also come equipped with black-and-white or color cameras that allow the school staff to not only hear, but also see who wants access. The cameras also allow the school to capture and store a picture of each visitor, even those denied entry for lack of identification or other reasons.

Today's visitor management systems are capable of capturing a digital photo of each visitor, as well as a digital image and details of the person's identification, such as a driver's license, passport or business card. That information can be compared against the national sex offender registry or other federal and state crime databases in only a few seconds. These systems also can take a visitor's picture and print a temporary photo ID badge in less than a minute. The extra level of security makes it more difficult for someone to check into the office and give a visitor's pass to another person.

Finally, it also is easy to program local information, such as temporary restraining orders, into the system. This helps prevent parents not permitted to remove children from school from doing so. The system records the date and time of person's arrival and departure from the office, creating a tracking mechanism of the person's activities. It's also possible to add a fingerprint reader or other biometric hardware to automatically detect frequent visitors or employees, allowing them to obtain a pass in less than 10 seconds.

Schools see visitors day in and day out, so it's important to keep track of exactly who is walking the halls at any given time.

Security Products
November 2007

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