Surveillance: Beyond the Camera

In integrated surveillance system is most effective to ensure safety.

Brian N. Moore, RSBS

Passive security camera surveillance has never stopped an incident that was occurring in a school.

I know some of our good readers have jumped out of their seats in defiance, shouting that their cameras have prevented a lot of problems. That may be true, but in the history of electronic security cameras, no one has ever documented a security camera leaping from the ceiling or wall and stopping a parental abduction or a fight in a hallway.

Cameras are great for documentation and if used properly, a fantastic tool for prevention. However, when it comes to playing an active role in school security, it may be far less expensive and more effective to have a solid training program in place for staff awareness and response.

Better yet, combine the two options for an integrated security response procedure that will work!

Passive vs. Active Surveillance

I mentioned *passive* video surveillance. Passive means that someone is not assigned to sit and actively view the camera system. There is

a difference between an employee who can monitor cameras and one whose *only* job function is monitoring. Secretaries and school resource officers who have monitors in their workspace but have other functions to perform are not actively watching them. That is *passive* video surveillance

There is a legal distinction as well. We often are accused of profiling students and using camera systems to catch certain students. If cameras are used only occasionally for active surveillance, you cannot use those cameras to follow a particular

student who is "always in trouble." That is profiling. That student may be able to demonstrate that he or she had a reasonable expectation of privacy since camera systems are not normally used to monitor an individual student's movements.

If we use the cameras actively because a particular area of a school has become a safety issue, then monitoring that area may not violate that same concept.

Because districts must weigh the cost and benefit for almost every task that we ask our staff to do, you may determine that actively monitoring cameras does not have the literal bang for the buck. Would having someone monitor a camera system have more of a preventative effect than having that same person standing in a specific area of the building?

Our goal is not to catch and prosecute crimes in school.

Most of us can tell you that a staff member's presence in the hallway or near restrooms can have a significant impact on the activities of students in that area. Most students think about the cameras after they have committed a conduct violation or a crime. However, they think twice when they see and hear an authoritative person in the area.

Remember that our goal is not to catch and prosecute crimes in school! Our goal is to prevent these issues and make sure that students are safe in school.

Staff Culture and Training

I worked with a school where a particularly nasty custody battle between two divorced parents had been going on for more than a year. During that time, the legal wrestling led to nearly 20 different changes in custody. The office staff had to constantly keep the records updated in the event that the "other parent" (whichever one it was that week) showed up to remove the child. The entire staff was aware of the situation.

Staff members are our most consistent presence in the hallways.

One day, one of the parents was discovered in a hallway speaking with the child. The parent did not have the visitor badge that the office issues and the staff member who discovered them became instantly suspicious. The staff member asked the parent and the child to join her in the office to make sure they had the right visitor badge. This alarmed the parent who was planning to commit a noncustodial abduction and had avoided the main entrance and office by sneaking into the school. Knowing that she was caught, the parent quickly ran from the school, the child in her arms.

The issue came to a quick resolution thanks to the rapid actions of the staff member who quickly alerted the office who contacted local police. Police blanketed the area and used the description given by the staff member to locate the child and the parent and recover the child safely.

By the way, there were cameras in the area and they did not stop the abduction. They did what they were supposed to do: gave responding officers key information about where the parent exited the school and her direction of flight once leaving the building. This was a perfect combination of staff response and cameras working in conjunction to resolve a crisis.

Staff members are our most consistent presence in the hallways. They should always check to see if a visitor is wearing an appropriate visitor badge. They do not have to be aggressive, but they must politely help people who are not where they belong or have not checked in with the office. Staff members who meet with resistance or open hostility should call the office and activate the emergency procedures.

Remember that it is better to lock down the school to deal with a suspicious person or possible threat than to explain why you failed to protect the children when you were in doubt. Our job is to protect kids, and making decisions that keep kids safe is always defendable in a judicial court as well as the court of public opinion.

Student safety depends on their quick response.

Remind staff of their responsibility to be present and aware of their surroundings in the hallways. Student safety depends on their quick response. Spend time discussing lessons learned from incidents that occurred in schools in your area. How could you or your staff have responded as individuals to help manage a situation better? Do all of your staff members know how to activate a lockdown through the office or how to get help if they need it?

The time to discuss this is during a faculty meeting or a safety meeting, not moments after a bad situation becomes worse because we didn't pre plan how we would respond.

Combining Resources

So you have decided to train your staff in security procedures and how to better manage hallway safety and visitor management. Now do you just forget about cameras completely? No way! Now you can put together an especially effective team using both.

Have you ever watched a police chase on television? What is the thing that you see almost immediately over the scene of the chase? A police helicopter, right? This extra set of eyes makes it easier and safer for the pursuing officers.

Similar to a police chase, a hallway incident is an emergency that can use active surveillance to resolve. In your incident response plans, do you have a plan for sending someone to the camera room or SRO's office to monitor the cameras during an incident? Obviously the SRO will be at the site of the incident, so an extra set of eyes that can follow people or activities can be extremely helpful during the crisis. They become the helicopter!

If a student who was involved in an incident flees the area or if other issues begin to occur elsewhere, this person can get on the radio and get people out to help without waiting for the situation to escalate. It really is a great use of your camera system during the emergency.

Security: Our First Priority

In the Red Clay Consolidated District, we always say that if we do not do a great job of educating students, that will be in the news and people will read about it. It is usually on the fourth page of the local section somewhere by the obituaries and the police blotter. However, if we fail to protect our students and an act of violence occurs, we will be front page news around the country that very night.

Like any parent, I will forget all about my child's math scores if he is hurt or worse in a school crisis. Our number one objective is to protect children from harm. Then we can teach them in comfort, knowing that they are safe.

Our main role as educators to the students in our care is always that of guardian and protector. Our world has changed and when threats occur literally everywhere in everyday life, we must change our perspective on how we provide an education, and that means becoming more aware of the safety and security in our schools. We can all have an impact on the safety of students.

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EDUCATING HOMEBOUND STUDENTS

Federal law requires that students with disabilities receive an education, even if the disability is temporary, such as a health issue that does not allow them to attend school for several weeks or months. School districts can meet this requirement in a variety of ways, including providing a teacher who travels to the students' homes to provide instruction or providing online instruction.

K12 Inc. suggests that the following elements are critical to a successful program for homebound students:

1. **Student/Guardian Orientation:** An orientation is critical to ensuring parents/guardians and students understand the program, policies, and expectations of the homebound program.
2. **Clear Pacing/Progress Goals:** Pacing and progress goals must be established and communicated clearly.
3. **Assessment and Intervention:** Students must be assessed frequently and closely to ensure they are on track and to ensure the learning plan is appropriate. If intervention is necessary or of modifications to the learning plan are in order, it's critical that changes be made as soon as possible.
4. **Flexible Learning Environment:** Students should have options as to when and where they learn—at home, in a hospital or other health facility, for example.
5. **Engagement:** It's important to help homebound student feels as though they are still connected to the school community, even if they are not physically in the school. Regular contact with school-based teachers and students in some capacity is helpful.

From "Guide to Implementing Online Homebound Education for Schools and Districts: Comparing Traditional Models of Delivery to an Online Model," published by K12, Inc. http://educators.k12.com/resources-results/white-papers-and-guides