

# Smart School Safety: Implementing an Effective School Security Assessment

*A comprehensive security assessment looks beyond cameras, locks, and metal detectors.*

By Michael Dorn



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During a school security assessment process, the Yorktown Central Heights (New York ) School District identified opportunities to improve traffic safety.

A public school system in the Pacific Northwest invested heavily in active shooter training programs in the wake of the tragic Sandy Hook Elementary School attack. The district soon experienced its own tragedy when a student committed suicide with a firearm in a classroom. Being the second suicide on school property made the impact even more devastating.

The time, effort, and fiscal resources invested in active shooter training not only failed to help the district prevent the tragedy, but taught officials a tough lesson about

the fact that suicide is a more common type of death on school property than an active shooter incident.

A review of school fatality data between 1998 and 2012 shows that twice as many fatalities on campus are the result of suicides rather than deaths from active shooter events (Satterly 2014).

The district had a comprehensive security assessment by an outside firm and has now implemented an exemplary evidence-based suicide prevention program. The district also completely revised its emergency preparedness plans and staff development approaches when

the assessment revealed that the active shooter training had actually degraded the level of preparedness of employees.

In another tragic case, one of the nation's largest school districts experienced a homicide after spending more than \$49 million in federal school security and emergency preparedness grant funding. The district had equipped the school where the shooting took place with an extensive security camera system with live monitoring, seven-foot wrought iron perimeter fencing, metal detectors, five security officers, and a police officer. However, the ensuing litigation demonstrated that the district was not using a variety of primary violence prevention strategies such as structured student supervision and multidisciplinary threat evaluation. The result was a number of missed opportunities to prevent the shooting.

## Shifting Focus

The most common mistake in school security assessments is to focus too heavily on catastrophic but rare acts of school violence such as active shooter incidents. In his report, *Relative Risk of Death in K12 Schools*, Steven Satterly (2014) shatters a number of common, pervasive, and deadly myths about school safety.

According to Satterly, 63 people were killed at K–12 schools during 1998–2012 in the incidents that met the United States Department of Homeland Security definition for an

active shooter event. These events are unusually traumatic for communities that experience them, yet there are far more single-victim tragedies where children die without media hype. For example, a seven-year-old was crushed to death while adjusting the sound on a television perched precariously on an undersized audio visual cart when his teacher left the room.

Satterly urges schools to consider other causes of death on K–12 campuses. For example, in U.S. schools between 1998 and 2012:

- There were 129 suicides on elementary, middle, and high school campuses.
- There were 426 school homicides that did not involve an active shooter incident.
- There were 525 deaths when students and staff were struck and killed by vehicles in school parking lots, on school sidewalks and at school crosswalks.

For this reason, school security assessments should encompass a variety of life-safety areas beyond the basic cameras, locks, doors, and hardware approach.

## Elements of an Assessment

A few examples of critical areas that should be assessed include:

**Student supervision.** Organized student supervision can decrease the risk of most types of school safety incidents such as bullying, abduction, sexual assault, gang activity, and school weapons assaults.

Effective student supervision can also reduce casualties for emergency situations such as tornadoes, fires, medical emergencies, and active shooter incidents. It increases the ability of staff to direct students to take protective actions rapidly enough to minimize the impact of an emergency.

This is one of several reasons school security assessments should be conducted while school is in session. Conducting assessments during summer months is not only less effective, but can create significant

liability exposure for school officials as well. Many of the most significant observations during an assessment involve how people arrive, move about, and depart from the school. Avoid assessing empty schools when possible.

## The most common mistake in school security assessments is to focus too heavily on catastrophic but rare acts of school violence such as active shooter incidents.

### Traffic safety during morning arrival and afternoon dismissal.

Traffic fatalities in school parking lots are among the most common forms of death for students and staff on campus, so a formal and structured evaluation of this important area can dramatically reduce the chances of death on campus.

### Emergency communications.

Evaluating the ability of staff to communicate with the school leadership team as well as the ability of the school leaders to quickly communicate the need for emergency protective actions to staff throughout the campus is crucial. These types of communications are often particularly challenging for large independent schools. Improvements in this area can also provide a day-to-day benefit by enhancing the routine operations of the school.

**Emotional security measures.** One of the most critical areas of a school security assessment involves the evaluation of emotional security measures. Important examples include verification that solid suicide prevention and multidisciplinary threat evaluation and management approaches with defensible assessment instruments are in use. Assessors should verify that the various measures are in written form, with documented training, and include representatives from law enforcement, mental health, and school administration.

While a proper assessment will carefully evaluate locks, doors,

security technologies, emergency plans, drill procedures, and other approaches people commonly associate with school security assessments, failing to address the key areas listed earlier can easily result in needless serious injuries and fatalities.

### Internal vs External Assessment

In an ideal world, a school security assessment by a qualified external team should be conducted annually. In reality, few school districts and nonpublic schools can afford this approach. For this reason, many K–12 organizations bring in outside evaluators every three to five years to supplement annual internally conducted assessments.

When districts use outside firms, they should conduct due diligence and obtain bids from at least three firms with extensive K–12 experience. Firms that have assessed schools with characteristics similar to theirs should be considered. For example, a large urban school system should seek vendors who have assessed other large public school systems while a Jewish school might want a firm that has assessed other Jewish schools. It is also wise to require and check at least six K–12 references to make sure the firm you select understands the unique nature of schools.

While it is ideal to conduct an assessment of every school and support facility, many public school systems with limited budgets have dramatically reduced the cost of external assessments by having a firm evaluate a representative sampling of schools to supplement an in-house assessment of all facilities.

This approach was used by the United States General Services

Administration for the Washington, D.C., Public School System and D.C. charter schools. While the Metropolitan Police Department assesses every school in the district, the GSA selected an outside firm to evaluate a representative sampling of the district's public and charter schools. This reduced the cost of the project significantly. The external assessment identified many opportunities for improvement throughout the district that were outside the scope of the internal assessment process.

Internal school security assessment processes can be helpful. One of the nation's largest public school districts had a vendor develop a customized web-based assessment tool so their personnel could conduct yearly security assessments for their 200 schools. The district was able to license the custom software and training program used by the vendor and now conducts similar assessments every year. This approach saves the district several hundred thousand dollars a year.

A number of prominent independent schools have highly capable security and safety directors. These professionals often understand the value of bringing in outside experts to look over their internal evaluations.

The Bolles School in Jacksonville, Florida, is one example. The school had already developed an exceptional security program for all three of its campuses under the guidance of Security Director Richard Williams, but retained a firm with extensive independent school experience for a helpful outside second perspective.

### Acting on Information

Acting on and documenting opportunities for improvement revealed during an assessment process is important. A few years ago, former Superintendent Gregory Nolan of the Flemington-Raritan (New Jersey) school district took his district's security assessment report and developed a companion checklist that enabled his staff to track, prioritize,

and document the district's efforts to enhance school safety. Illustrating another approach, Assistant Superintendent Thomas Cole of the Yorktown Central Heights (New York) school district decided to have a second assessment to evaluate a wide array of security upgrades, traffic safety enhancements, and other improvements.

Regardless of the approach used, it can be helpful to track and document improvements made after an assessment is completed.

### School Security Assessment Success Stories

Properly conducted, school security assessments can make schools safer, improve their operating efficiency, and reduce fiscal waste while enhancing the learning environment. As one example, the Richmond, Virginia, public school system engaged an outside firm to conduct an assessment of its schools in conjunction with hiring a new safety and security director. The district was able to more effectively plan for improvements requiring long-term budgeting while also implementing numerous no-cost and low-cost enhancements.

District Safety and Security Director Tim Mallory was able to implement numerous improvements

identified in the assessment before the written reports for the project were even completed. His efforts also led to improvements in school climate that support the primary mission of the district to educate its 24,000 students.

### Responsible Stewardship

Properly conducted, school security assessments can enhance safety, reduce liability exposure, improve school climate, and protect the reputation of K-12 schools and districts. Thoughtful security assessment processes can also prevent significant fiscal waste in a time when school budgets are often severely strained. Today's school leaders should consider the modern school security assessment to be an important and valuable school improvement tool.

### Reference

Satterly, S. 2014. *Report of Relative Risks of Death in U.S. K12 Schools*. Safe Havens International. [safehavensinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Relative\\_Risks\\_of\\_Death\\_in\\_U.S.\\_K-12\\_Schools.pdf](http://safehavensinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Relative_Risks_of_Death_in_U.S._K-12_Schools.pdf)

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