

Forging Partnerships for School Safety

Partnerships with school safety service providers is one option for providing safe, secure schools.

By Kent C. Journey, CPP



Columbine. Virginia Tech. Sandy Hook. Umpqua Community College. School security has been a concern for years, but *concern* has evolved into *priority*, and “should-have” security measures are now “must-haves.” The increase in the number of shootings in schools has amplified the level of awareness and concern for overall campus safety.

In 2002, the Secret Service analyzed 37 incidents involving 41 student attackers. The focus of the study was to develop information about preattack behavior and communications. The study concluded that most of those acts of violence were not impulsive but rather were planned. Most important, they determined that fellow

classmates of the attacker had reason to believe the violence might occur.

The findings of that study indicate that some of the attacks could have been prevented with heightened awareness and effective communication (see page 15). Safety awareness programs, in which students can and do participate, could help improve the overall perception of a safe campus and encourage students to report activities that they may otherwise ignore. For more information, see *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates* (www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/threatassessmentguide.pdf).

Creating Partnerships

Many school districts are turning to security service providers to help ensure a safe and secure learning and teaching environment. With security as their sole focus, expert security service providers consider the research and recommendations made by many different federal agencies, including the U.S. Departments of Homeland Security, Justice, Education, and Health and Human Services; the early-warning signs of potential violence; the characteristics of the school campus; and any previous incidents in the school and school district.



Partnerships with security service providers offer a level of preparedness that enables the school district to work with the administrators and staff to ensure that their long-term safety and security objectives are met.

Security professionals work with safety committees at each school to develop programs that enhance campus safety through education, social media, and ongoing awareness. The committees, which provide the oversight required at each school's campus for improved safety, include representatives from various school departments, the administration, and even the student body.

Security providers help schools identify crises and eliminate potential threats before they happen. They work with the school committees to develop a customized security plan that considers the physical plant, lighting, alarm systems, audio and visual systems, and use of communications and social media to promote school safety.

Reasonable Precautions

No school can prevent every crisis nor give the assurance that such events will never take place on its campus. However, by partnering with a security service provider, a district can ensure that every reasonable precaution is taken to avoid a crisis, and that the school community can respond appropriately and quickly if a safety issue does arise.

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Identifying Potential Threats

The Secret Service study suggests that some acts of school violence could have been prevented if people had recognized the warning signs. The National School Safety Center developed the following list of characteristics of those youths who have caused school-associated violence:

- Has a history of tantrums and uncontrollable angry outbursts
- Characteristically resorts to name-calling, cursing, or abusive language
- Habitually makes violent threats when angry
- Has previously brought a weapon to school
- Has a background of serious disciplinary problems at school and in the community
- Has a background of drug, alcohol, or other substance abuse or dependency
- Is on the fringe of his or her peer group with few or no close friends
- Is preoccupied with weapons, explosives, or other incendiary devices
- Has previously been truant, suspended, or expelled from school
- Displays cruelty to animals
- Has little or no supervision and support from parents or a caring adult
- Has witnessed or has been a victim of abuse or neglect in the home
- Has been bullied and/or bullies or intimidates peers or younger children
- Tends to blame others for difficulties and problems he or she causes himself or herself
- Consistently prefers TV shows, movies, or music expressing violent themes and acts
- Prefers reading materials dealing with violent themes, rituals, and abuse
- Reflects anger, frustration, and the dark side of life in school essays or writing projects
- Is involved with a gang or an antisocial group on the fringe of peer acceptance
- Is often depressed, has significant mood swings, or both
- Has threatened or attempted suicide

According to the National School Safety Center, "These characteristics should serve to alert school administrators, teachers and support staff to address needs of troubled students through meetings with parents, provision of school counseling, guidance and mentoring services, as well as referrals to appropriate community health/social services and law enforcement personnel" (www.schoolsafety.us/media-resources/checklist-of-characteristics-of-youth-who-have-caused-school-associated-violent-deaths).