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In Search of a Repeatable, Affordable School Security Model

One North Carolina elementary school demonstrates how risk assessments, technology and policies can be implemented in a cost-effective way to improve safety. Could this model apply to your K-12 campus? *By Jon Daum*

In the 15 years since the Columbine tragedy, most school districts have made progress in securing campuses and students. But an “It can’t happen here” attitude is still prevalent in many communities. Annually there are still dozens of shootings on American K-12 campuses, along with millions of incidents of violence, theft and other crimes. Most security experts, law enforcement officers and educators would agree there is still work to be done.

But is it possible to create a school security plan that can easily be repeated across campuses of different ages, design,

size and use? Can that plan also be affordable for urban, suburban and rural school districts?

The answer to both questions is yes, according to one small North Carolina district that’s in the process of reviewing a pilot project officials say could serve as a model for its 16 pre-K-12 campuses. Duplin County Schools, located about 90 miles south of the state capital of Raleigh, is looking at a mix of electronic security solutions, policies and procedures to create a higher level of protection for its 9,300 students and staff.

Over the years, the district has report-

ed few security problems — an occasional theft, random vandalism and fights between students. Yet the December 2012 Sandy Hook tragedy struck a nerve with district and community leaders. They vowed to make school security a top priority.

District leaders asked the local sheriff’s office for advice. The recommendation: hire an experienced, school security consultant to conduct risk assessments of each campus.

“The district had been doing its own security assessments for years,” says Capt. Tim Jones of the Duplin County



Built in 1975, Wallace Elementary School in Duplin County, N.C., is a K-5 campus with 750 students and 94 teachers and staff members. In addition to the installation of security cameras, improved access control and visitor management technology, the SRO's patrol vehicle is now parked in the school parking lot, which acts as a deterrent to criminal activity.

Sheriff's Office. "While they had been doing a good job, they lacked the fresh eye that an experienced outside school security consultant could bring to the project."

Fortunately for the district, a nationally recognized school security consultant lives in Duplin County. Patrick V. Fiel, founder of PVF Security Consulting, is retired from the U.S. Army Military Police Corps and the former executive director of security for the Washington, D.C., Public School System. He agreed to conduct risk assessments for each district campus.

RISK ASSESSMENTS DIG DEEP INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

A risk assessment serves as the basis for all future security planning, highlighting a campus' strengths as well as pinpointing areas needing improvement. A K-12 risk assessment typically takes two to three days to complete. But before Fiel even visits a campus, he drives and walks through the surrounding neighborhood.

In Duplin County he checked for safe passages for kids walking to and from school and noted area businesses that could attract criminals who might impact a campus. He also wanted to know how far the school was

located from first responders.

Once on campus, he walked the perimeter, looking at landscaping, lighting, fencing, gates and signage. At one school, dense trees made it difficult to see the campus from the street. Many campuses had lights that were burned out or failed to provide adequate illumination. Some school parking lots lacked gates, while others had gates that weren't being locked. The district quickly remedied many of these problems.

Moving around the buildings, Fiel checked to see that doors were locked after hours (not all were). He identified how



many building entries were open during the day (most schools had multiple unlocked doors).

Inside, he looked to see how visitors were greeted and if they, faculty and staff were required to wear ID badges (they were). He also checked to determine if classroom doors are locked from the inside during classes (most weren't).

He inspected auditoriums, cafeterias, athletic fields, playgrounds, outbuildings (including temporary classrooms), communications systems and signage. Fiel's team checked rooftops and ventilation ducts to make sure they offered no access into a school. The assessment also included the district bus fleet, sporting event security and agreements with scouting, religious and other organizations using the campuses after classes.

He noted that each Duplin County school had a video surveillance system and a full-time student resource officer (SRO) employed by the local sheriff's office.

"Having a SRO on campus during school hours is one of the most important steps a district can take to help protect its students, staff and property," Fiel says. "Duplin County's schools don't have to

wait for a trained and armed law enforcement officer to arrive and take charge during an emergency."

Interviews with key district personnel provided important insights. He also reviewed emergency crisis plans and training of all staff for active shooter response, lockdown procedures, workplace violence, bullying, gangs and drugs.

When the assessments were completed, Fiel presented the district with 17 reports — one for each campus and the district's administrative facilities.

"Overall, Duplin County Schools were in as good or better shape as most districts across the country when it came to securing their facilities," he says. "But there was room for improvements."

PLANNING FOR AND CREATING A MODEL CAMPUS

As the district reviewed Fiel's exhaustive reports, he made them an offer — he would pick one school to show how it's possible to create an affordable and easily repeatable plan to help protect the campus against an armed attacker or opportunistic thieves. The board accepted.

The campus selected for the pilot proj-

The sheriff's department has access to video from any of Duplin County's campuses.

Additionally, principals, assistant principals, business and data managers and receptionists can view the video anytime on their desktop computers.

ect was Wallace Elementary, which educates about 750 students in grades K-5 with 94 teachers and staff members. The school is located in rural Wallace, a township with a population of nearly 4,000.

To make his offer even more acceptable to the district, Fiel called on security industry contacts to collect donations of security equipment and services.

Wallace Elementary, built in 1975, was designed as an open campus with twin entries at the front of the main building. Fiel had one entry secured. Signage makes it clear that the remaining entrance is now the only visitor entry.

A video intercom from Aiphone was mounted outside the door. Visitors are instructed to press the intercom's button to talk with the receptionist in the school office. She can see and talk with visitors using a monitor on her desk. If the visitor is approved she remotely unlocks the door. As

an added precaution, security screens from Harmony Security Products were installed in front of the glass to protect this and several other doors on campus. The stainless steel mesh screens are impervious to rips.

"The idea behind the locked door, intercom and screens is to delay a potential troublemaker to provide law enforcement more time to respond to an emergency," Fiel says.

The school office is just inside the entry. Acting upon Fiel's recommendation, the district built a wall and lockable doors to break up a hallway that led past the office and provided access to the classrooms.

For several years, the school used a registration system in the office that printed an ID badge after visitors entered their names and reasons for a visit. But the system required no identification and visitors could easily enter a false name.

"Schools need to be aware of what they

"We found unlocked doors and one outside entry that had been propped open for the convenience of a teacher. That can't happen or even the best plans and equipment can be defeated."

*Patrick V. Fiel,
PVF Security Consulting*

are buying," says Fiel. "Salespeople can make any product sound like a good solution, when, in fact, it may offer little or no real value."

Now, upon entering the office, visitors

are asked to produce a government-issued ID card that is swiped through a FASTPASS visitor management system from Security Identification Systems Corp. (SISCO). The system checks the visitor's information against data in federal and state registered sex offender databases. According to the national Sex Offender Registry, there are more than 15,000 registered sex offenders in North Carolina; 89 in Duplin County and 16 near Wallace Elementary. Upon clearance, FASTPASS takes a photo of the visitor and prints an adhesive badge. The receptionist then remotely unlocks the new interior doors allowing access to the classrooms.

Because the Sandy Hook gunman went from classroom to classroom shooting his victims, Fiel's team paid special attention to door locks. Classrooms just past the office were equipped with locks from ASSA ABLOY Group brands; Corbin Russ-

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A video intercom from Aiphone was mounted outside Wallace Elementary School's front door. Visitors are instructed to press the intercom's button to talk with the receptionist in the school office. She can see and talk with visitors using a monitor on her desk. If the visitor is approved she remotely unlocks the door.

win (door locks), Securitron (power supplies), HES (strikes) and Rockwood (latch guard). They automatically lock from the inside when closed. During an emergency, teachers have been instructed to keep their classroom doors closed until they hear a code phrase from a sheriff's deputy.

Three additional IP video cameras from Axis Communications were installed to improve views of the school entry. The school already had 19 analog cameras in place. The analog camera images are converted to a digital signal and all cameras are recorded on a server in the main office. The principal, assistant principal,

business and data managers and the receptionist can view the video anytime on their desktop computers.

The sheriff's department also has access to video from this and any of Duplin County's campuses. The department can also remotely view live video feeds using wirelessly connected laptops mounted in three patrol vehicles, providing valuable insights for officers as they respond to an emergency.

Tyco Integrated Security provided integration services for the installation of the new systems at Wallace Elementary.

Several more of Fiel's assessment recommendations added to the school's over-

all security. Overgrown landscaping was cut back to improve sightlines, new and more powerful lighting was installed and lockable gates were added to the main and auxiliary parking lots. The SRO now parks his sheriff's department vehicle just inside the main lot, making it clear to visitors that an armed officer is on duty. Added signage directs visitors to the office entry. Panic buttons were added in the administrative offices and several other discreet locations known only to the faculty and staff. When pressed, the buttons immediately reach the sheriff's dispatch office.

FOLLOWING THROUGH ON POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Fiel also included a review of the district's policies and procedures for handling events ranging from a routine crime to an active shooter on campus. Fiel praised the district for its written policies but said even the best-written plans offer little if administrators, faculty and staff fail to follow them.

"We found unlocked doors and one outside entry that had been propped open for the convenience of a teacher," he says. "That can't happen or even the best plans and equipment can be defeated."

The district is almost constantly reviewing its policies and procedures to handle emergencies, according to Ben Thigpen, Ed.D., Duplin County Schools' executive director of student services. The district, through various committees and subcommittees, sets standards that the principals at each school are charged with enforcing.

Each month principals are expected to conduct one of five campus-wide drills that focus on lockdowns or other emergency situations. Principals are also expected to deal with safety and/or security violations caused by faculty or staff.

Thigpen praised the recently complet-

Districts Can Overcome Funding Issues

Patrick V. Fiel, founder of PVF Security Consulting who worked with Duplin County (N.C.) Schools to improve the district's security, says funding is typically the first reason cited by school districts for postponing security initiatives. He points out, however, that there are numerous sources of available funding.

"In Duplin County the school district can count on local tax revenue, various state grants and money from the state lottery," he says. "The district also employs a grant writer to apply for many competitive private, state and federal grants."

The completed risk assessments put Duplin County Schools in a better position to receive grants as money typically goes to those districts that have already identified specific security needs.

Local governments also frequently get involved in providing funding. Last year, the local district sought and received a \$200,000 grant from the Duplin County Commissioners to fund security improvements. That is expected to become an annual commitment.

"Every time school budgets are discussed, security has to be in the forefront," Fiel says. "That's become the case in Duplin County. The leadership has been very aggressive in working on this project and seeking the funds to pay for it."

He believes the improvements that have been made at Wallace Elementary, the school Fiel used as a model for Duplin County, should fit within the budgets of most school districts — provided they are willing to make security a high priority.

ed risk assessments and said they have been shared with the principals and their school leadership teams. Improvements requiring capital expenditures still rest with the district, but each school is expected to act on other identified items.

“Sandy Hook made us realize we have to take more of a look at what we need to do on each campus,” he says. “You’re never where you fully need to be, so that’s why we just have to keep working and improving our responses to emergencies.”

SECURITY PLANS AND IMPLEMENTATIONS IMPRESS DISTRICT

Chuck Farrior, chairman of the Duplin County Schools Board of Education, attended Wallace Elementary as a child, as did his children. His wife is a first grade teacher at the school. He’s impressed with what has been done to improve the campus’ security.

“Our 16 schools were built between the 1950s and 1990s in different styles and sizes to fit the needs and the times,” he says. “But the security plan we have at Wallace Elementary is repeatable — no matter the age, size or type of campus construction.”

Farrior expects the board to implement many of the suggestions in the risk assessments immediately; the rest will be phased in as budgets permit. That being said, he thinks the board will have to give security a higher priority than in the past.

“When I was a student here, doors were commonly left open throughout the day,” he says. “But we’re not immune to today’s outside events. We’ve made the decision that we don’t want to put our kids in harm’s way. When parents send their children to our schools, they should do so knowing they will be safe.”

District Superintendent Austin Obasohan, Ed.D., says the administration and board share the same view of school security.

“No learning can take place without the assurance of a safe environment,” he claims. “You can never control 100% of all events, but you have to be as prepared as possible.”

Dwight Holland, assistant principal at Wallace Elementary, says the work at his school has been well received by parents, teachers and staff.



LEFT: Classrooms just past the office were equipped with locks from ASSA ABLOY Group brands: Corbin Russwin (door locks), Securitron (power supplies), HES (strikes) and Rockwood (latch guard). They automatically lock from the inside when closed. During an emergency, teachers have been instructed to keep their classroom doors closed until they hear a code phrase from a sheriff’s deputy. RIGHT: Security screens from Harmony Security Products were installed in front of the glass of several doors on campus. The stainless steel mesh screens are impervious to rips.

TACKLING THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL SECURITY

The security experts, educators, first responders and community members interviewed agree that all new schools, additions and renovations should be designed with a basic level of security in mind. That would include fundamentals such as a more compact footprint, fewer entry points, adequate lighting, locks and landscape design.

Fiel believes that while an access control system using card keys is considered the ideal choice for schools, the systems are still considered too expensive for many, if not most, districts. As a result, traditional key locks will continue to be used for the foreseeable future.

School board chairman Farrior suggests that architectural and design firms be required to have a security expert on

staff or retainer when designing public buildings such as schools.

Fiel would go a step further. He suggests national security standards be overseen and enforced by either the federal Department of Justice or Department of Education. The standards would set minimal levels of security with any school or district able to exceed them.

“We need a national conference with teachers, administrators, law enforcement, architects and security industry representatives providing input,” he claims. “Standards would give districts some guidelines and take much of the guesswork out of securing a campus. It would all be based on best practices.” **CS**

JON DAUM is a freelance writer and a principal in the San Diego-based public relations firm Daum Weigle. He has worked within the security industry since 1990.

