

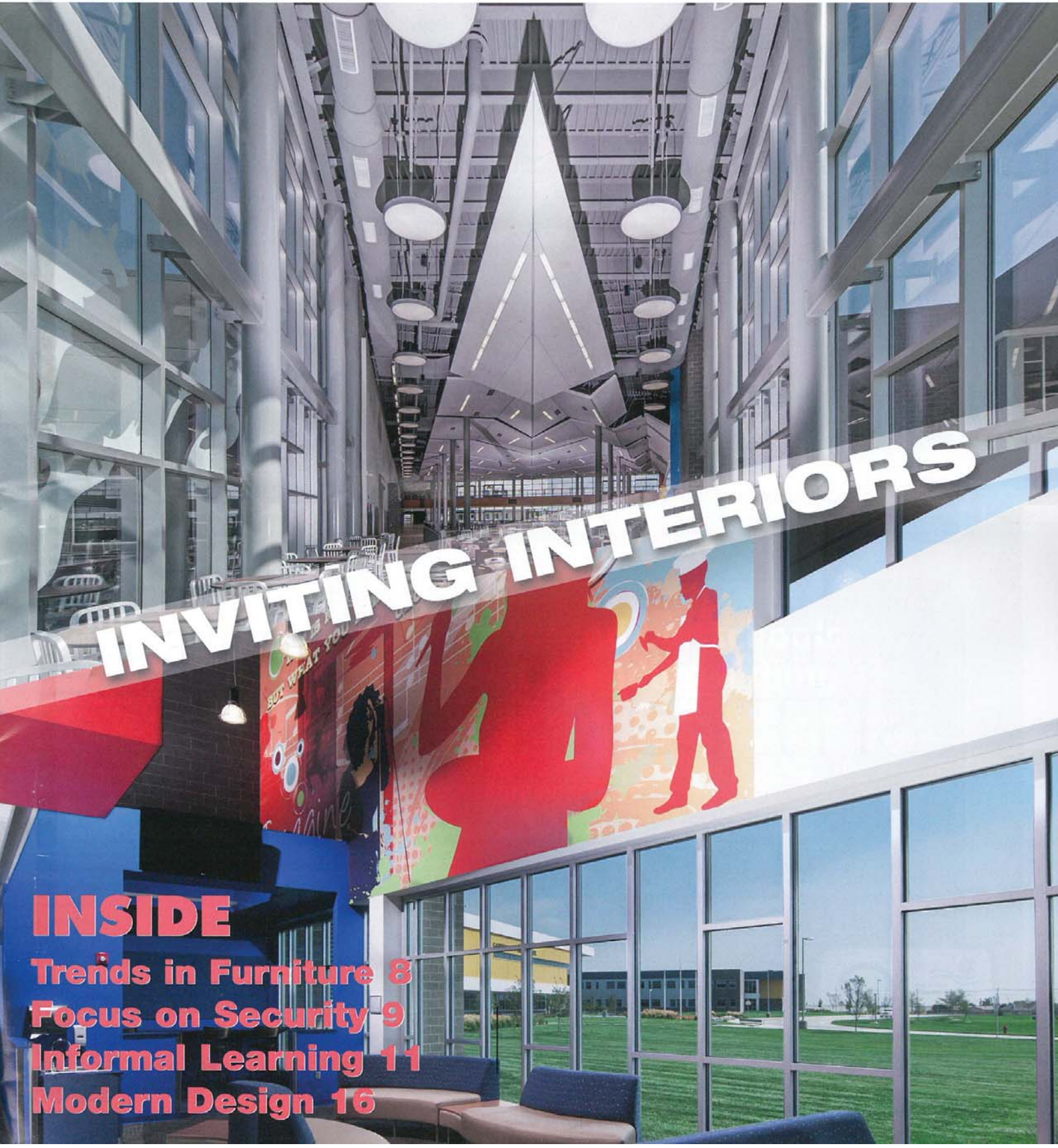
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Visitor Management at Schools

By Anthony Zagami

A typical school has dozens of adults — parents, vendors, volunteers and others — visiting the campus each day. The overwhelming majority of these people are honest about their names and intentions as they sign the registration book. However, some lie and others may just skip the process, walking unchallenged through an open gate. Having unknown people on campus while children are present can quickly become a nightmare, as we have all witnessed.



Zagami

Visitor management is a problem that faces virtually every school, but is particularly troublesome when innocent children are present. Creating a safe and secure place for children starts with proper planning and procedures. Administrators are no longer in a position to assume that “bad” things happen only at other schools.

Gunmen are not the only fear. Whether it is an urban, suburban or rural school, many share the same security challenges. For example, enter just about any zip code into the Department of Justice’s national sex offender registry and don’t be surprised to find multiple registered sex offenders living a short distance from a school. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, there are about 750,000 registered sex offenders in the United States. Additionally, recent research indicates that the federal government has sharply scaled back efforts to keep dangerous sexual predators in prison past their sentences. More and more are returning to the streets and some back to the schoolyard.

So, what should a school administrator do? Every school needs written, reviewed and practiced visitor management policies. One of the first steps is making sure there is only one visitor entrance onto a campus. Once classes begin in the morning, all but one gate should be locked and remain so as long as children are onsite. That one unlocked gate or door must lead visitors directly into the main office.

Once there, visitors must produce government-issued identification, such as a driver’s license, to run through an electronic visitor management system that provides high-speed, level-one checks against local, state and national sexual offender databases and level-two checks against FBI and state and local

law enforcement databases. A system also should allow districts and individual campuses to set up their own “deny entry” list and be used to confirm authorization for student pick-ups.

A picture from the ID card or one taken by a networked camera should be stored in the system for future reference, making it more difficult for a person to enter the campus using another person’s ID. Once the approval process is complete, the system should print a wearable photo ID badge, designed to help prevent passing the badge to an unauthorized person. The printed badge should include an expiration date and a bar code that can be swiped over a reader as the visitor leaves to provide a record that he or she has left the campus.

A major goal of visitor management software is to move visitors through the process as accurately and quickly as possible. First-time visitors should be cleared and badged in about 15 seconds. The system must be easy to use and require little training. Volunteers often are tasked with maintaining a school’s visitor management efforts. A system also must be scalable to conform to changes in a campus’s needs.

Here are a few other related benefits that an electronic visitor management system can provide.

Liability: By checking each visitor entering the school, campus administrators are showing diligence and continued commitment to keeping unwanted persons away from students.

Compliance: More than 40 states have some version of the Lundsford Act, first enacted in Florida in 2005. The law has many requirements intended to keep sex offenders away from children, including at school. Also known as Jessica’s Law, the act was passed soon after a Florida girl was sexually battered and murdered by a previously convicted sex offender.

Safety: If a critical event — such as a bomb threat, active shooter or severe weather condition — were to impact a campus, administrators need a full inventory of who is on school grounds; visitor management systems can likewise assist first responders in accounting for everyone on campus.

Forensic Management: System-generated reports can help investigators see who was on campus when thefts, vandalism and other criminal activities occurred.

Volunteer Recognition: Many schools provide awards for top volunteers. A visitor management system can keep records of the type of visitor and how much time he or she has spent on campus throughout the school year.

A visitor management system can function as a stand-alone solution for a single campus or be networked with others in that district to provide more benefits.

Administrators can use available

real-time reports to spot and investigate suspicious patterns, such as a person moving from campus-to-campus seeking entry. The system also can work as a district-wide messaging center. For example, an Amber Alert, severe weather warning or other emergency can be communicated instantly to every workstation on the network.

There are two more important steps, both of which should be part of a school’s written plan, which can increase the effectiveness of an electronic visitor management system.

- Teachers and staff must wear photo ID badges while on campus. With all approved adults — including visitors — clearly badged, students will be able to spot someone they can trust during an emergency.

- Teachers and staff need to immediately challenge any adult on campus not wearing a permanent or temporary ID badge. If the challenged person fails to immediately head to the office for a temporary badge, he or she should be

asked to immediately leave the campus. Failure to do so should result in a call to local law enforcement.

There also are some additional low-tech security measures that should be part of the plan. Fencing can close off areas and help lead visitors to the correct entry. Also, signage can help direct people to the office and provide valuable information, such as the hours a school is open and the proper credentials required to gain campus access.

Too many schools still allow people to enter unchallenged. But with so many potential dangers to people and property, administrators can no longer tolerate an open campus.

Anthony R. Zagami, founder, president and CEO of Security Identification Systems Corp. (SISCO) has over 25 years of experience founding and managing companies that develop sophisticated electronic security systems and software solutions.

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