Security is in the cards for Cobb County School District

From a test that began as a maintenance initiative a few years ago, Cobb County School District has upgraded access at its elementary schools to a card access control system that helps ensure security for students and staff. At the same time, it simplifies access management and reduces costs.

The Cobb County School District, located in the northwest suburbs of Atlanta, is the second largest school system in Georgia. It serves more than 106,000 students with a total of 114 schools.

Until a few years ago, access to all schools was controlled only by mechanical keys. Executive Director, Maintenance Services James H. Carlson says, "The keys were marked 'Do Not Duplicate,' but there were thousands of keys out there. Each school was responsible for managing its own keys, so it was hard to know who had them." In order to determine whether electronic access control was feasible, the District's Maintenance Services ran a pilot test at one elementary school, installing card readers and electric latch exit devices. These were installed at the five most-used entrances, including the main doors, bus entrance and exit doors and playground doors. All other doors were locked and monitored.

Shortly after the initial installation proved to be a success, the District's Superintendent attended a conference at the White House that helped sharpen the focus on improving security. Coupled with a special-option sales tax that provided funding, this allowed the program to be expanded from the original maintenance initiative to encompass all the elementary schools in the District.

Fair Oaks Elementary School is one of 68 elementary schools in the Cobb County, Georgia School District.

Card reader outside door controls access at selected entrances.

Von Duprin EL99 electric latch exit devices are activated by card reader to control access while providing safe egress at all times. Door and latch positions are monitored to ensure door is securely closed.

At each school, the process began with an inspection of every door. Carlson explains, "We visited other school systems and universities and realized that the doors, frames, closers and hardware all have to be in perfect condition for an access control system to work. Then we made a determination of what was needed to bring every door up to standards and be sure it would close securely. In some cases we replaced wood doors with metal doors." Once this was completed, proximity card readers and electric latch exit devices were installed to control the major entrances identified by the school's principal. To control visitors during school hours, school offices are located adjacent to the front entrances.

The system provides flexibility to accommodate school schedules. Typically it unlocks and relocks the controlled doors according to schedule during school hours. The system can be programmed to eliminate the automatic opening for holidays throughout the entire school year, and the occasional snow days are easy to program when needed.

The controlled doors are equipped with Von Duprin EL98 or EL99 electric latch exit devices, which are activated to unlock the doors by the card reader. Power for the devices is carried from the frame to the door via an EPT power transfer. In some cases, existing exit devices were upgraded to electric latch operation, using a kit available from the manufacturer. This saved the expense of replacing the entire device.

Card access makes it easier to issue and delete credentials than issuing new keys or getting them returned if someone leaves. Deleting a lost card also is considerably less expensive than rekeying multiple doors. In addition, cards can be issued for a limited time or specific hours to provide access for contractors or other special needs. Carlson says that the human resources department issues the cards once background checks are complete. Each school can then give an employee the right to access its building as required.

Monitoring plays an important role in ensuring door security. Carlson explains, "In order to make sure the doors really are secure, we realized we needed to monitor the door to be sure it is closed and the latch to be sure it is latched. We could have the door closed and the latch taped, or the latch in the locked position with the door blocked open, so we monitor both functions. If either is faulty, an alert is sent to the school office, and if nobody responds in 15 minutes, public safety is notified. "

Door security also was enhanced by upgrading double doors to include removable lockable mullions. These allow the doorway to be opened up for moving large items, yet cannot loosen or be tampered with like bolted mullions.

To date, the initiative has focused on the District's 68 elementary schools. Future plans may include a similar approach at the 25 middle schools, while the open campus high schools use video cameras as their main security medium.

COBB COUNTY
SCHOOL DISTRICT

As the second largest school system in Georgia, the Cobb County School District is responsible for educating more than 106,000 students, with a total of 114 schools; in a diverse, constantly changing suburban environment. The mission of the Cobb County School District is to provide an academically rigorous, caring and safe educational environment in partnership with families, students and the community.

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