

Critical steps in assessing and accessing K-12 security

Practically every K-12 administrator and facility manager has the same dilemma: how to do more with less. Faced with shrinking budgets, long-range planning to address maintenance and security issues can often fall by the wayside, as general maintenance, security upgrades or building repairs are often deferred until a future budget cycle—or even postponed indefinitely until funding becomes available.

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration's 2012 Commercial Building Energy Consumption Survey, U.S. schools average over 40 years in age. This fact, combined with years of backlogged maintenance means many schools are now in dire need of significant repairs and security upgrades. And although security and maintenance are typically treated—and funded—as two separate issues, they are inextricably linked and vitally important to ensuring the safety of all school occupants.

Assessing the weakest link

Replacing a door, lock, window, etc., is much more costly than simply repairing it in a timely manner. It has been estimated that every \$1 of deferred maintenance results in \$4 of capital repairs later, but there are additional costs that are frequently overlooked or underestimated. The first is the cost in staff productivity as replacements typically take much longer to complete than repairs. The second is the potential cost of having a weak point in the security of the facility. Doors that do not close properly cannot be locked securely, creating vulnerabilities that can be exploited to perpetrate crimes ranging from petty theft and truancy to vandalism and abduction.

In order to mitigate these risks, facility managers should periodically conduct assessments to identify, evaluate and report on the overall condition of their building. Facility assessments should evaluate existing conditions and identify any deficiencies, including security vulnerabilities.

In K-12 facilities, the biggest security vulnerability is frequently found at the perimeter. This is generally due to

the majority of funds being focused on the most visible points of entry such as the front entrance, leaving other areas vulnerable

to unauthorized access. While main entrances serve as primary access points for the school's pedestrian traffic, there are an average of six secondary openings at each school that can also be used to gain access to the facility. Because the traffic through these openings is much lower, it is estimated that only half are equipped with an electronic access control system that can monitor and restrict access. In a recent study, over 55 percent of schools surveyed reported that their secondary doors were frequently left unlocked or propped open, with 22 percent stating that this occurs on a weekly or even daily basis.





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“Access control is the cornerstone of effective school security and schools cannot furnish a safe learning environment without controlling and restricting access and being able to account for students and staff. An effective physical security assessment will identify both strengths and weaknesses of your security program. More than simply identifying vulnerabilities, a good assessment report will prioritize recommendations in a phased approach.”

– Paul Timm, a Physical Security Professional (PSP), and the author of *School Security: How to Build and Strengthen a School Safety Program*.

Interoperability is key

One of the biggest concerns faced by school administrators is that the products they invest in today will not comply with new standards or technology in the future as their campus expands or needs change. This is why it's so important for schools to have a forward-thinking security plan in place that is fully scalable to account for future growth. A scalable plan ensures the IT infrastructure and associated products are “future-proof” and will not only meet the current needs of the facility, but will grow and adapt in the future.

The key feature to look for is open architecture hardware that will allow the device to be compatible with any existing or future system. Interoperability is key to minimizing the lifetime cost of ownership for any system. It also enables facilities to institute a scalable plan, allowing them to upgrade security in a multi-phased approach as budgets permit. This is particularly useful for a campus that is facing future expansion as enrollments increase. Security can be expanded one wing at a time or even one door at a time, as budgets permit. This gives school administrators maximum flexibility and avoids the problem of having incompatible security products.

“Collaboratively decide how to prioritize and plan incremental improvement,” suggests Timm. “Securing an entire campus is an ongoing process and no single solution fits every situation.”

Invest in long-term solutions

When it comes to door hardware maintenance and security solutions, facility owners and managers should invest in solutions that are designed for a specific purpose, and anticipate the types of heavy use and abuse common to educational facilities. Seek out solutions and brands that:

- Have a reputation for quality in order to minimize frequent maintenance
- Offer repair/replacement parts for heavy-use components
- Provide training on ongoing management and maintenance
- Easily upgrade or scale to accommodate future needs and extend the life of the products
- Are easy to maintain and adjust
- Have experts who will assist in the assessment and prioritization of repairs, maintenance, and upgrades

With the number of available products, the selection process can be overwhelming to an end user. Hardware and security professionals can help navigate the vast array of choices and develop a scalable, long-term solution that can be implemented over time as budgets permit. They will also ensure that the system or products installed are compatible, appropriate, code-compliant and cost-effective.

Conclusion

Having an overarching plan will ensure that security investments are prioritized appropriately and will be the most effective for the facility's needs. In order to address these security issues properly, schools should partner with a security professional to develop a comprehensive security plan for the facility. They can play a vital role in

helping to identify the security measures that need to be implemented.

Given the potential ramification of the decisions that have to be made, the importance of choosing a quality, professional security integrator cannot be overstated. Insist on professional references and be thorough when interviewing to determine if they will be an effective partner for your project. While controlling costs is an issue on any project, particularly in light of the budget cuts many schools have had to contend with, this is not the area to cut corners.

Most importantly, develop a comprehensive, long-term plan to routinely identify and address all facility maintenance and security issues. Without a solid plan in place, it is easy for the list of repairs to become costly replacements, as well as serious security vulnerabilities. Maintenance and security go hand-in-hand, and regular assessments of both should be conducted to ensure the safety of all building occupants.

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