

Visitor Management in Schools

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Last month we discussed the layered entryway to schools and how this physical layer protects our school building. This physical layer, however, does us no good without a complimentary human layer of protection. Think back to a historical lesson in which the Greeks used the Trojan Horse at the City of Troy's closed gates. Ultimately, the besieged city was defeated due to human curiosity. Although no assailant is going to leave a wooden horse at our school's doorstep, they may count on the human factor of security within our schools being deficient. The biggest human factor we can discuss that is entwined with the layered school office entry is visitor management.

According to *Jane's Safe Schools Planning Guide for All Hazards*, "An element of your school safety plan should address both visitor control procedures and where the visitor should enter the school. Part of the visitor control plan should be clear in definition the times that visitors can come to the school, the reason for the visit, what type of identification will be accepted for that person, and what entry point into the school should be used." Let's further discuss these items and how they relate to the safety within our schools.

School visitor management actually begins as a visitor drives onto the school property. The school entrance lanes and parking lots should have prominent, simple signage directing them towards a location that will further provide directions to the main entrance after they park their vehicle. Signs should also be prominent around the school building and property that inform visitors where they need to go. An often-forgotten point is providing visitors with further direction in the form of informative signs. Generally, a best practice is having one main entrance; however, there are some larger schools that may need multiple main entrances, such as a consolidated school district with a grade, middle, and high school. Having noted a school may need multiple main entrances, they should still be cognizant in attempting to reduce the number of entrances to as few as practically possible. Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) tenets on territorial control and signage can be used regarding visitor direction to the main office.

A culture of safety must be established for security measures to truly be effective. The culture should exist with school staff members, students, parents, and the community. Communication, training, and reinforcement of the safety procedures are key.

School visitors can come in different forms. Some of the visitors may be parents, other relatives, educational professionals, vendors, community members, etc. For a myriad of reasons, parents drop off their children late or pick them up early. A positive practice is that when a parent drops off and / or picks up their student outside the normal hours, the parent should remain in a controlled area (generally the main office) and the student should be summoned and / or escorted to the office. The parents should not enter the school without an escort to get their child. Along the same lines, if a teacher assigned to a classroom has a visitor, an available school employee should supervise that classroom as the teacher responds to the office. Unless there is

a valid reason, the visitor does not need to go to the classroom, especially without an employee escort. A graphic example of how badly not following this type of procedure can go is the 2017 shooting at North Park Elementary School in San Bernardino, California. A teacher's husband, who a number of school staff members knew was estranged, abusive, and dangerous towards his wife, was allowed to enter the school unescorted. The estranged husband entered the wife's classroom and shot her, several students who tried to hide behind her, and then himself, ending the incident. This is an unfortunate and stark reminder of why these safeguards must be in place within a K-12 school.

A person wishing to enter the school building should always be identified and have a legitimate purpose to be at the school. Visitors arriving at the school without a legitimate purpose certainly do not need to enter. Recently, I had the opportunity to conduct a number of school vulnerability assessments throughout the state. One new high school principal explained that a number of school parents remained inside the school talking and drinking coffee with one another for about a half hour after school started. The principal referred to this as the coffee klatch. The principal quickly suggested that an alternative was that the klatch meet nearby at a local establishment and changed the informal culture that existed at the school.

Let's assume that a visitor has a legitimate purpose for visiting the school and has been able to pass through the first layer of security, the main entry, and is now in contact with the office staff. Several of our area schools have implemented a system (Raptor Technologies) that checks the individual through a database for various information, such as orders of protection, the sex offender registry, and other issues. There may also be other issues that the school administration or staff is directly aware of (reference San Bernardino). The school administration should ensure that the appropriate people are aware of issues with potential problematic visitors.

Once the visitor has been vetted, we next need accountability in the form of a visitor log that would reflect who is the visitor, what time did they arrive, and what is their purpose for the visit (which may reflect where they need to go and who they are seeing). Lanyards, identification badges, or other forms such as a sticker generated by the Raptor Technologies visitor management system (see example below) help to quickly identify who has followed the visitor management protocols and who has not. If a visitor in the school does not have a visible identifier or escort, they can be quickly identified and challenged by someone (school staff and students) within the school and directed immediately back to the office.



Some schools have effectively utilized badges and lanyards that are different labels or colors that specify what the visitor's purpose is, such as "volunteer," "vendor," or "student teacher." One point to make here is that there needs to be accountability for the identification system. Once the lanyards, badges, etc. no longer have an accountability system, they become less effective as a safety tool. Also, as you can see in the above pictorial example, the Raptor badge has a date, time, and purpose specific to the visit. A second point is that if the system is in place at the school, then 100% compliance needs to be in place as far as having these identifiers displayed throughout the school day.

Lanyards, badges, or other identification systems, along with access security, are only as good as what the culture of safety within the school allows. The human component needs to be taught and then reinforced continually to ensure that the safety protocols are followed. As human beings, we are polite by nature. With school security in mind, we need to sometimes be polite, but also inquisitive and direct, especially if it appears there is a breach in security. School staff members and students need not be afraid to turn someone away if they are trying to access the school from an outside door, or challenge them if they appear to have not followed the school visitor protocols. If the visitor does turn out to have a legitimate reason for being within the school, we can ensure they adhere to the protocols and apologize if we were wrong. According to Kenneth Trump, "Regardless of the number of secured doors or signs, school staff must assertively challenge visitors and strangers observed in their building." (Trump p. 78)

Visitor management protocols are yet another important layer of protection within our K-12 schools. Utilizing a visitor management system with the proper safety mindset throughout the school will help to quickly identify if there is a person that might not belong in the building. Once again, visitor management (software) complements the layered entryway and access control (hardware).

"Tomorrow: your reward for working safely today." - Robert Pelton

References:

Dorn, Michael (2004). *Jane's safe schools planning guide for all hazards*. Jane's Information Group.

Trump, Kenneth (2011). *Proactive school security and emergency preparedness planning*. Corwin. United States.

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