OVERCOMING COMMON BARRIERS TO GOOD CAMPUS SAFETY

SCHOOL SAFETY EFFORTS MUST be comprehensive, based on a hazard and vulnerability assessment process, sustainable and tailored to the very unique environment of the education system. Safety, security, and emergency preparedness are a bigger priority for our nation’s day care centers, K-12 public, charter and independent schools and institutions of higher learning than at any time in our nation’s history. Though major safety incidents have been taking place in our nation’s educational organizations for as long as we have had schools, highly publicized multiple victim shootings over the past decade combined with...
increased concerns of terrorism since September 11, 2001, and the horrific school attack at Beslan have all created an increased emphasis on campus safety far greater than ever before. At the same time, some campus organizations have clearly placed a higher priority on safety than others. There are a variety of reasons some campus organizations have lackluster safety programs. They range from outright apathy to budget constraints and disinformation about effective campus safety measures and a variety of other impediments to sound decision making. This article will explore common barriers to good campus safety as well as proven approaches to addressing them.

**Common Barriers to Good Campus Safety**

There are a number of common barriers to good campus safety programs. When you encounter a campus organization with poor security and safety strategies, at least some of the barriers listed below will typically be at play.

**Apathy**

Though not as common as the other barriers explored here, there are situations where apathy is a problem. A security vendor related to me how in the middle of a training session for security personnel for a large violence-plagued school system, the security director interrupted him and loudly proclaimed that he didn't care how many students killed each other, he only cared about making it another few years to retirement. The vendor was devastated. If the morale of the security director was this low, how motivated were the officers in his department? While this is far more extreme than the type of apathy we typically think of, it does illustrate the type of attitude that causes some campus safety issues—a lack of desire to take any meaningful action to improve safety. In public K-12 school systems that are chronically failing to perform, we often see significant safety issues because of apathy. More often, there are instances where campus officials who have the authority to act to improve safety simply don’t think anything can be done and continue down the same failing course.

**Safety Strategies are Based on Misperceptions about Campus Safety**

Another problem we see stems from serious misperceptions about school safety that cause campus officials to misdirect precious resources such as employee time, training efforts, security equipment purchases and staffing in ineffective ways. For example, due to the common misperception that K-12 school homicides have increased in recent years, school safety measures are often overly focused on the prevention of school shootings at the expense of other far more common and also potentially equally deadly hazards. Similarly, many higher education officials were not aware that campus weapons assaults were as much of a problem for institutions of higher learning until the Virginia Tech tragedy. Even though homicide is not a leading cause of death for students at institutions of higher learning, the per capita homicide rate is higher than for K-12 schools according to comparative data generated by *Campus Safety Magazine* several years prior to the Virginia Tech shooting. This is one reason that hazard and vulnerability assessments are so important. The only way for campus safety efforts to be effective is for them to be implemented based on an assessment process instead of media hype.

**Lack of Funds**

One of the primary reasons cited for lack of safety measures is lack of funding. While funding is a challenging issue for many campus organizations, it often comes down to a lack of safety being a priority. The cost savings achieved is frequently offset by losses much bigger than the savings achieved. For example, some public K-12 school systems have become far less effective at meeting academic goals because employee turnover rates are so high due to problems with safety, order and discipline. Independent schools have suffered severe damage to their reputations by not making safety a priority with adequate funding. And some of our institutions of higher learning have suffered catastrophic events because of gaps in their safety programs due to inadequate funding. In contrast, we have worked with K-12 public school systems that report dramatic improvements in academic achievement as well as an independent school that reports a significant increase in enrollment due to significant emphasis on safety. Increasingly, we encounter institutions of higher learning that are making similar investments in improving their organizations by adequately funding safety, security and emergency management in their organizations. I often ask conference
attendees the litmus test question “What is your good name worth?”

Confusion Over What to Do

Many school superintendents, heads of schools, college and university presidents and other key administrators tell us they have been frustrated because they encounter so much contradictory advice on what to do about safety. A number of campus officials have told us that they have spent considerable sums of money on campus safety products and consulting services which turned out to be far less effective than they had been led to believe. This sometimes results in inaction by campus officials who are afraid of being burned again. Educators often find it difficult to determine which products and service providers are best-suited for their needs.

Political Pressures

One of the most common hurdles for campus officials involves political pressure which interferes with the correct courses of action. This type of pressure can be from students, parents, board members, the media and others who may not be properly informed as to the most effective forms of risk. Frequently, influential individuals or groups insist on measures that are not the best expenditure of funds or resist much-needed measures because of the misperceptions relating to safety mentioned earlier. For example, we have seen countless K-12 schools with extensive security camera coverage and dozens of unlocked exterior doors. While the cameras can be beneficial if utilized properly, they must be used as part of a more comprehensive approach.

We have seen innumerable failures of security cameras when they have not been incorporated properly with other supportive measures like good access control, weapons screening and effective school resource officer programs. A school district police officer from a large urban district recently related information about a school shooting that followed this pattern. He said video from the security camera showed the offender arriving outside the victim’s classroom and waiting in the hall for the bell to ring. Upon his arrival, he looked directly into the camera and clearly was not concerned that he was being recorded. A short time later, the perpetrator shot the victim as he exited the classroom when the bell rang. While the district has spent millions on security cameras and school district police officers, they had done nothing to address the severe bullying that triggered the shooting.

Schools often seek technology solutions as a simple fix to their security and safety problems without integrating them into the human world of educational environments. A common example of this are access control systems for college and university dormitories where students routinely admit others without knowing who they are or why they are entering the facility. Implementing great technology without creating the social change to support the measures is a common problem. Well-designed live, web and video training programs can be used to help create awareness which will result in positive behaviors to support security and safety measures.

Sometimes, employees who don’t understand the need for safety and security measures create the political barriers to good safety. We were asked to perform an access control audit for a large school district because the secretaries’ union complained about security measures. Two secretaries in the district were upset that they were being asked to look at potential visitors on a security camera, verify identification and buzz them into the school. The access control audit combined with GIS analysis of registered sexual offenders and convicted killers living near schools along with a red team assessment provided clear and convincing evidence to the union that they would better protect their members by supporting the proposed security measures. The union not only dropped the complaint, but endorsed the district’s efforts to protect their members as well as students.

How Can Campus Organizations Work to Overcome These Common Challenges?

Fortunately, any campus organization that makes safety a real priority in word as well as deed can have a top flight safety, security and emergency preparedness program. Here are a few of the more critical action steps to help overcome these barriers.

Conduct Thorough Assessments

The assessment process is crucial to align safety, security and emergency preparedness measures to actual risk. Using a variety of concepts can supplement a review of past incident data to provide a holistic view of risk. These concepts include:

- Tactical site surveys of all facilities
- Student, staff and (for K-12 schools) parent safety surveys
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Review of the community hazard and vulnerability assessment coordinated through the local emergency management agency
GIS mapping information review
Completion of crisis plan evaluation checklists
Red team assessments
Past incident data reviews should include worker’s compensation claims, criminal incidents, accident reports and other similar data.

Once these types of assessments have been completed, it is easier to keep people from being sidetracked when determining priorities. Hazards should be considered from two primary standpoints—likelihood of occurrence and consequences of occurrence. For example, on some campus organizations the risk of earthquake is unlikely but distinctly possible. Though unlikely, such an event could be catastrophic, making it appropriate to develop mitigation and preparedness measures for it.

Inform All Stakeholders About Actual Safety Risks

One way to help overcome political interference is to inform a variety of stakeholders of the results of the assessment. Political personalities can be somewhat neutered when they find opposition from an informed constituency, be it a formal constituency, as in the case of elected officials, or unofficial constituencies, as in the case of campus employees who are unofficial power brokers and can derail legitimate campus safety efforts in a heartbeat if they are not countered.

Another reason this approach is appropriate is to counter the disinformation in the media regarding campus safety. The best way to counter the damage done by pseudo expert talking heads and reporters who use alarmist scare tactics to generate attention for themselves is to inform stakeholders of the truth. The hazard and vulnerability assessment process should dispel the common media myths and get people focused on a balanced approach to safety, security and emergency preparedness.

Develop a Comprehensive Approach to Campus Safety

The all hazards approach to campus safety is crucial to any effective safety strategy. By identifying all relevant types of hazards in the assessment phase and then taking care to address each of them rather than just a few, a much more reliable safety program can be put into place. Local law enforcement, fire service, court, emergency management and public health officials should be directly involved in crafting safety, security and emergency preparedness strategies for campus organizations.

Utilizing Grants and Student Service Fees to Properly Fund Security Measures

The federal government has dispensed hundreds of millions in K-12 school safety and emergency preparedness grants in recent years. Though some of this type of funding has only recently begun to flow to institutions of higher learning, the United States Department of Education recently began awarding emergency preparedness grants to colleges and universities as well. Funding is also sometimes available through private foundations in the form of grants. Many campus organizations have found local sponsorship for safety, security and emergency preparedness measures to be helpful.

In addition, a number of K-12 schools as well as institutions of higher learning have used student fees to help fund campus safety measures. For example, some universities fund emergency notification systems by charging a small fee to each student in their student services fees. A Georgia high school instituted a $25 fee for parking privileges and used the money to hire a school resource officer. Another Georgia school district charges parents a $25 recovery fee when their child is caught with a cellular telephone on school property and the money helps offset the costs of the school district police department. This district has been awarded more than fifteen million dollars in school safety and law enforcement grants in recent years and has purchased metal detectors, security cameras, access control equipment, computers as well as funding educational programs, police officer salaries and a host of other security, safety and emergency preparedness efforts.

Focus on Inexpensive Yet Powerful Measures As Well As Those That Cost Money

While solid funding no doubt helps to improve safety programs, we have found that most campus organizations can achieve significant improvements in safety, security and emergency preparedness through relatively inexpensive and in some cases, totally cost free methods. For example, simply taking the time to discuss student supervision and to review supervi-
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What's Being Done?

Organizations like the Foundation for the Advancement of Life Safety and Security are steadily making progress with campaigns to promote a safer built environment by informing interested parties through research, education and communication.

The Foundation, in its partnership with the Door and Hardware Institute (DHI), works with recognized experts in the construction of more than 95% of the door openings in the nation’s schools. The owners of these buildings rely on the advice and expertise of a door and hardware consultant to keep them current on standards and technology as they pertain to safety and security. Current standards and technology need to offer a combination of the best possible and most reasonable amount of security that allows for the safest entry and egress into and out of a school building.

Those who do this work in conjunction with the Foundation understand the balance of life safety and security. DHI works with more than 1,500 Architectural Hardware Consultants (AHCs) whose role it is to design every door opening from a use, life safety and security perspective.

This is an important area of expertise that needs to be included by every county and school board reassessing the life safety and security requirements of our nation’s schools.

In an effort to further our industry’s efforts on this front, The Foundation was in attendance at the April 23rd hearing held by the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.

Foundation board member Richard Barnhard, FDHI, DAHC/CDC, attended the hearing chaired by Senator Joseph Lieberman (I-CT) and ranking member Susan Collins (R-ME).

“It was important for the Foundation to attend this hearing,” said Barnhard. “In light of the tragic events that took place at Virginia Tech, it is critical that the Foundation continue to be present and to gather—and eventually present—information that will help lawmakers make important legislative decisions regarding life safety and security.”

Another example of efforts to further safety in schools was the recent life safety and security inspections for a number of Head Start Centers located in the San Diego, CA area. This Foundation sponsored event was hosted in cooperation with the Neighborhood House Association in San Diego. The inspections consisted of walking through 15 centers over a two-day period to determine what changes, if any, could be made to doors at the points-of-entry and to fire-rated doors.

“With recent school-related incidents across the country and with the known dangers of fire, we knew that we could play an active role in helping organizations understand the balance between security and life safety,” said James Tartre, an Architectural Hardware Consultant (AHC) and Foundation president. “Doors are instrumental to a child’s safety and we felt that we could have a positive impact at the Head Start Centers.”

Efforts to further this cause are on-going. Be sure to visit the Foundation Web site, www.LifeSafetyAndSecurity.org for more information on current activities and efforts.

Call to Action

Working with officials on a new school project or school renovation? Make sure you consult a DHI-certified consultant at each stage of planning, design, and building to best address all issues of access control. Using the knowledge and experience of a qualified industry expert can offer school administrators the tools they need to implement sound policies that ultimately ensure the safety of everyone within a school building and minimize the potential for unauthorized entry into these halls of education. Visit the DHI Web site, www.dhi.org to find a certified consultant in your area.

Adapt Technology and Strategies to the Campus Environment

The locks, access control systems, security camera systems and other safety and security solutions offered by today’s vendors are often incredibly valuable tools when properly utilized. For example, the Bibb County, Georgia Public School System used a student suggestion to develop a new way to use metal detectors in schools in the early 1990’s. The district police force worked with a district-wide school safety task force and students to develop a surprise random metal detection program than not only saved the district more than $50 million dollars in the first ten years, but helped reduce student weapons violations by more than 90% in the same time period.

Create Support for Security and Safety Technology Solutions By Staff and Students

The above mentioned random metal detection program has been strongly supported by students, school employees and parents because they have been informed of the risks it is designed to address and each of these groups was involved in implementing the program. Our experience is that students, staff and parents will support appropriate safety and security measures if they are logical, likely to be effective and if they understand why they are being implemented. As one example, we find that parents who have seen a concealed weapons demonstration showing how easy it is for an individual to hide a dozen guns in ordinary clothing if they do not have to tuck in their shirts almost always support K-12 school dress codes.

Demonstrate How Good Security Efforts are Cost Effective and Serve the Mission of the Campus Organization

Another approach to help overcome the common barrier of funding limitations is to show educational officials how spending money up front not only helps to save money in preventing safety incidents, but can improve the fiscal situation in other ways. For example, campus organizations can not only save money by avoiding litigation and increased insurance costs, but can reduce expenditures in related areas as well. For example, the state of California has tracked the academic performance of 1,700 schools along with safety and discipline data for a number of years. The results indicate that safer K-12 schools outperform less safe schools academically. Similarly, the national loss rate
The key is to make sure the solutions are adapted to the school environment instead of adapting the school to the solution.

for K-12 school teachers is above 50% every five years. This means that half the teachers in America leave the field of education every five years costing American school districts billions of dollars. Surveys indicate that issues relating to safety, order and discipline heavily influence many of these decisions. Similarly, educational organizations that invest in safety can actually increase revenues. For example, one large independent school client told us they saw an increase in student enrollment of more than 20% after they hired a dozen new security officers and implemented a host of new safety and security measures. Colleges and universities that fund superb safety, security and emergency preparedness measures may also see increases in enrollment.

Conclusion

Barriers to good safety, security and emergency preparedness can often be overcome with sound and convincing persuasion, creativity, tireless effort and a focus on the safety of staff and students. Asking the tough questions and looking for expert assistance in the right places, any campus organization can improve the level of safety.

About the Author: Michael Dorn is the Executive Director of Safe Havens International Inc. an international non profit campus safety center. He has keynoted hundreds of state, national and international professional conferences from Virginia to Vietnam and has authored and co-authored more than twenty books on school safety. His non profit center works globally to help make day care centers, K-12 schools and institutions of higher learning safer places. His latest book—Let None Learn in Fear—can be downloaded for free at www.safehavensinternational.org

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