Creating a Visitor Management Plan

By Patrick V. Fiel, Sr.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, there are over 700,000 registered sex offenders in the United States. And each day, according to the National Center of Missing and Exploited Children, more than 700 children are reported abducted.

Those are numbers that should frighten any parent and gain the attention of elementary school administrators and principals.

In this country it is not difficult to walk onto most school campuses unchallenged. If a school has a visitor management plan, it likely consists of a voluntary sign-in book in the administrative office. The problem with that is most sexual predators, child abductors, thieves and other criminals will not bother to follow the procedure.

Campus thefts are commonplace. Students, staff and the school are negatively impacted by these crimes when they are robbed of the tools they need for learning. On most campuses, it is easy for anyone to walk into a classroom during the day and check out which rooms contain the most valuable and saleable equipment, such as computers, laptops, printers and televisions. Many times a person carrying a stolen computer could walk off campus unchallenged – even during normal school hours.

Fires, broken windows, graffiti, super-glued door locks and other acts of vandalism also cause interruptions in children's education. These acts cost school districts across the country hundreds of millions of dollars each year to repair the damage caused by vandals.

Allowing access to those who belong on campus like students, teachers, staff, parent volunteers and vendors while keeping out sexual predators, kidnappers, thieves and vandals is a challenge facing virtually every principal, superintendent, board member and school resource officer.

As one of the first steps in protecting people and property, every school needs a visitor management plan that is well written, well rehearsed and well enforced. A plan should include basic policies and procedures, which generally are inexpensive and easy to implement. There are other simple, low-tech steps that add another level of protection. Then there are electronic security solutions that offer a higher level of protection that can be well within the reach of most schools.

Here is a look at some of the basic components of a good visitor management plan. Each school should:

- Limit the number of campus entries. Many schools allow students (and who knows who else) to enter the campus from multiple points. Elementary schools, in particular, should have one entry into the campus for students, parents and other visitors. High school campuses should limit access to only a few entries. While classes are in session, those entries should be closed and locked to outsiders. Open the entry 30 minutes before the start of school and close it 30 minutes after the last classes.

- Station school resource officers and/or administrative staff at each access point to monitor who enters the campus immediately before and after school and during lunch (if students are permitted to leave campus). Permit only known students and volunteers to enter. Direct all other visitors to the office. It is very critical that during school hours school administrators and/or school resource officers conduct a 'walk around' of the exterior to verify that the doors are properly closed and secured.

- Require all teachers and staff to wear a photo/ID badge at all times while on the school grounds. Badges can be issued on a district-wide basis as employees are hired. This also makes it easier for younger children to spot someone he or she can trust in the event of an emergency.

- Require that all parents, volunteers, vendors and other visitors register in the office. All visitors should show a state-issued identification card and leave a home telephone number and reason for being on campus as well as the time at arrival and departure. A school staff member should provide a temporary identification badge that must be worn at all times on campus. Visitors should check out when leaving and return the badge. Regular parent volunteers may also be issued a photo ID badge through the district. Instruct all teachers and staff members to immediately challenge any adult walking about the campus that does not have an identification badge. If the person refuses to leave, local law enforcement should be summoned.

- Make a written record of the school's visitor management plan and give a copy to every teacher and staff member. Then discuss and practice it before the start of each new school year. Also, plan on reviewing the plan a couple of times during the year to reinforce it to veteran employees and clarify it for new hires.

Each of these steps requires very little expense at the campus level beyond a registration book, a pen and adhesive labels.

There are also low-tech security steps that can help in controlling access to the campus. Fencing, gates and locks can close off many potential entries and

guide visitors to the correct entry points. Also signage can help direct people to the correct entrances and provide information such as office hours and the proper credentials needed to gain access to the campus.

Basic electronic security products add a higher measure of security. Intercom systems allow visitors to communicate with office personnel while still outside the school. Many systems also come equipped with black-and-white or color cameras that allow the school staff to not only hear, but to see who wants access. The cameras can allow the school to capture and store a picture of each visitor – even those denied entry for a lack of identification or other reasons. Video intercoms are also useful for remotely permitting access to vendors and contractors requiring entry to cafeterias, loading docks, storage buildings and gyms.

There are also visitor management systems that are capable of capturing a digital photo of the person as well as a digital image and details of the individual's identification, such as a driver's license, passport or business card.   That information can be compared against national sex offender registry or other federal and state crime databases. A check of this type takes only a few seconds. These systems can also take a visitor's picture and print a temporary photo ID badge in less than a minute. This extra level of security makes it more difficult for someone to check into the office and then give a visitor's pass to another person.

It is also easy to program local information, such as temporary restraining orders, into the system. This will help prevent a child from being removed from the school by a parent who is not permitted to do so. The systems record the exact date and time of a person's arrival and departure from the office, creating a tracking mechanism of the individual's activities. It is also possible to add a fingerprint reader or other biometric hardware to automatically detect frequent visitors or employees allowing them to obtain a pass in less than ten seconds.

School administrators can no longer delay putting a strict visitor management plan into place to protect their students, staff and property. Far too many of our nation's campuses are virtually wide open to sexual predators or other common criminals. There are a number of very inexpensive steps that can bring immediate results. For those schools willing to spend a little for technology solutions, the benefits can be even greater. The time to act is now.

(Patrick V. Fiel, Sr. is a security consultant. He brings more than 30 years of security/law enforcement experience to the position. Patrick for six years was executive director of school security of Washington, D.C. Public School System, where he managed 150 school campuses. During his tenure with the United States Army Military Police Corps, he had operational and management oversight roles with the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) at the Pentagon, at SHAPE/NATO Headquarters – Belgium, and at West Point Military Academy)

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