

Panic Button

Wireless solution contacts first responders from anywhere on campus

By [Patrick V. Fiel Sr.](#) | Jan 01, 2015

A fifth grade teacher on playground duty spots an armed male climbing a fence onto the school campus. Another teacher watches a student fall down stairs breaking bones and opening a large gash in his head. A staff member has stayed late and is sexually assaulted as she heads to her car in the parking lot.

These are only a few examples of situations of which K-12 school administrators, teachers and staff need a rapid connection to first responders. They need that capability from virtually any part of a campus. When an emergency strikes, seconds count.

Telephones and intercoms are effective tools for seeking assistance. But, they are generally available only in classrooms and offices. Traditional panic buttons can be effective, but require a wired connection to an access control or intrusion system limiting where they are placed.

However, there is now a solution that can put the power of a panic button into the hands of virtually all school employees no matter where on campus they are located when an emergency strikes. System Pendants Go Where Teachers Go

Like a bank alarm, the buttons—in the form of a wearable pendant—are silent, yet they offer the advantage of portability. They go where teachers, staff, administrators and school resource officers go: to classrooms, cafeteria, library, parking lot, playground, athletic field and other remote facilities.

The Tattletale Alarm System is the world's first patented, portable and cellular-based wireless panic button system designed specifically to protect schools. A base unit resides in a centrally located office while teachers, administrators and school resource officers wear or carry only a small pendant. By simultaneously pressing two buttons, school personnel silently contacts the local 911 dispatch center with an emergency signal. The cellular technology means there is no need for cables or expensive landlines to connect with first responders.

Schools may choose to have the pendant signals directly contact first responders or have the signals routed through a national monitoring center, where trained professionals pass along the call for help while attempting to learn more details about the emergency. The center can also send notifications via SMS text messages and/or emails to anyone designated by school officials.

A View from Two Schools

St. Albert the Great is a private, Catholic prekindergarten through Grade 8 school and is located about 20 miles south of Cleveland in North Royalton, Ohio. The school installed a Tattletale system in December 2013, according to Principal Edward Vittardi to provide “peace of mind” to teachers and parents.

“It’s difficult to prepare for all emergencies that can occur on a school campus,” Vittardi said. “But we wanted to provide our staff and parents as much comfort as possible by knowing that we can contact emergency responders in seconds.”

The school has a system with about 60 pendants— enough for all administrators, teachers and classified staff to carry one. The system also extends to the pastor and his office staff in the nearby rectory.

Fortunately, the school hasn't had an emergency situation requiring the system's use. But, Vittardi said each pendant was tested to ensure it communicated as intended. Those tests were conducted in association with the local police department and the campus' school resource officer. In addition to notifying the police, each pendant alerted Vittardi of the "emergency" via a text message on his mobile phone.

He said that while teachers and staff are pleased with the system, it seems to be even more popular with parents of the more than 800 students on campus.

"We believe our dedication to the security of our students is one of the biggest reasons we had an increase in enrollment this school year," Vittardi said. "I don't think our panic button system was the only reason for that increase, but I do believe it played a role."

The St. Albert campus security plan also includes surveillance cameras, card key door locks and a main entry that funnels visitors into the office without allowing them to directly access student areas. Vittardi said an ongoing school security committee comprised of administrators, teachers and parents constantly review solutions, such as the panic button system, that add cost-effective security layers to the campus.

A public charter school located in the southeastern United States is another adopter of the system. Due to security concerns, school officials asked that the K-8 campus name and specific location not be named.

A committee that included school and city officials, along with a representative of the local police department, selected the Tattletale solution. Two base stations were installed last summer to be ready for the new school year in the fall. Nearly 100 administrators, teachers, assistants, staff members and the campus' school resource officer received a pendant.

One of the first decisions involving the system was setting a protocol for its use. Pendant signals provide police with the name of the school, the user's name and work location. The police department asked that the system only be used in case of an active shooter on campus to avoid a massive response to a lesser emergency. That required training to ensure that school employees understood how to properly use the pendants.

Like the Ohio school, this campus has not yet had an active emergency. But the school's SRO said that testing before the fall session began showed that police were consistently notified within 25 seconds of a pendant being pushed from any location on campus. All pendant signals are set to immediately notify the police, with the national monitoring center notifying school administrators and the SRO.

School administrators require all employees to carry/wear the pendant at all times while on campus. According to the SRO, teachers and staff were initially concerned about accidentally pushing the buttons and causing false alarms. But the system requires both buttons to be pushed simultaneously, greatly reducing the possibility of error. After carrying the pendants for several months without major incident, the staff has relaxed and come to appreciate the system as a valuable security layer, said the SRO.

He said the panic button system was a good complement to the school's surveillance cameras, window security film and classroom doors that lock from the inside.

The System

The Tattletale plug-and-play base station comes with a military-grade 900 MHz spread spectrum transmitter to provide up to 2,000 feet of wireless coverage. Emergency data packets are transmitted to the nearest cellular towers in just over half a second.

A 10-hour battery backup, a standard part of the package, keeps the system operating during a power failure.

The wireless and water-resistant pendants are similar to a car key fob. Each base station can accommodate up to 64 pendants, enough to cover most schools. Wireless signal boosters are also available to extend cellular coverage on larger campuses or those with architectural designs such as thick rock walls.

The Protocols

Before installing a panic button system, each school should work closely with local first responders to determine what constitutes an emergency. That may change from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Then it's important to work with school staff to make sure they understand how and when to use the system.

It's also wise to conduct monthly drills to make sure system components, such as pendant batteries, are functioning. These tests also allow new employees to be trained. But remember to notify first responders before beginning any tests.

Legislation requiring schools to employ an emergency notification system, such as panic buttons, is being considered in several states. During their 2013 session, North Carolina legislators mandated that every public school have a panic alarm system installed by July 2015. The law also came with a fund that districts could apply to help pay for the systems.

The Ohio School Facilities Commission recently opened a second round of grants for each of the state's public and private school to receive funding for an emergency notification system, including a panic button solution.

Part of an Affordable Campus Security Solution

The horrible massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary seemed to finally awaken many school administrators to the critical need for tighter campus security. While the initial strong response has cooled with time, the events of December 2012 that left 26 people dead are still resonating throughout the K-12 community. And the shootings still continue—45 at K-12 schools since Sandy Hook (another 40+ on college campuses).

The latest response has seemed smarter and more focused than previous security spending sprees. Administrators are listening to experts that have shown that it's possible to secure a campus without breaking the budget.

Added layers of security that focus on entry points are making it more difficult for active shooters, as well as common criminals, sex offenders and other unwanted visitors to gain access to students.

Schools of all types are hardening the entries through the use of video intercoms, visitor management systems and—importantly— keeping doors locked anytime children are on campus. These are all affordable solutions that work.

And now a wireless panic button solution can fill in another missing piece of a robust, overall campus security plan. A panic button system with wireless pendants is more flexible and affordable than standard access control-linked systems or radios that connect to first responders. A single radio is about the same cost as a basic Tattletale system. The cost of each additional radio would provide a dozen or more pendants for each school while providing greater coverage.

Portable panic buttons are an affordable solution that stretches beyond the front door to bring added security to an entire campus.

About the Author

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