

Assessment and policy crucial to preventing guns on campus

BY [PATRICK FIEL, SR.](#) ON AUG 23, 2018



School administrators need to be creative in prohibiting all types of weapons from entering their campuses. Whether an attacker chooses to carry a gun, knife or other type of weapon, they have to find ways to keep potentially all weapons off their K-12 campuses.

Shootings like those that recently occurred in Parkland, Fla., and Santa Fe, Texas, raise serious concerns and a question: how do we strike a balance between education and security without making our schools resemble a prison?

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the latest study in 2017 showed that during the 2015–16 school year, there were 1,600 reported firearm possession incidents at schools in the U.S.

Before taking any action, one of the most important steps administrators can take is to perform a security assessment to help them design a full plan for securing the entire campus. Any plan will undoubtedly include security technology, but no single security technology can protect a K-12 campus; true protection comes from many layers of security.

Keeping Them Guessing

A very effective plan that can be implemented is one that keeps students off balance or guessing what the security professionals have designed. That plan includes random searches of student lockers (within legal restrictions) and the use of police K-9 units to sniff for weapons and drugs in and around buildings and in parking lots. By keeping the landscape well-trimmed, we can also provide fewer hiding places for prohibited items.

When I was Executive Director of Security for the Washington D.C. School District, I was responsible for the safety and security of 150 schools and over 76,000 students. I had the approval by the school board and the school superintendent to install walk-through and handheld metal detectors at all middle/junior/senior high schools throughout the district.

The handheld metal detectors were very useful at sporting events and school dances, where we couldn't risk allowing weapons in an already highly charged atmosphere.

While the searches and metal detectors uncovered many weapons and drugs, our seizures grew smaller as the school year progressed. The randomness of our activities left students so unsure of our plans that many students decided it wasn't worth the risk of trying to sneak something on the campus.

Signs in the parking lot, at building entries and throughout the facility declared the campus a drug- and weapon-free zone, making it clear that violators would be suspended, expelled and/or prosecuted.

The Role of Security Technology and Manpower

An anonymous tip line or website can also allow students and staff and parents to share rumors before they become reality.

While fire drills are mandated in virtually every school district, it's equally important that schools practice active shooter drills. Admittedly, they take time away from classroom instruction, but these drills can save lives and prevent injuries.

PA systems, phones, radios, duress buttons, fire alarms and other devices also can save lives during an emergency. Test them regularly to make sure they're in operational order.

Make sure every school has a police officer (often called a school resource officer) assigned to the campus throughout each school day. In case of a shooting or other act of violence, a trained first responder can initiate action within seconds, not minutes.

Don't forget surveillance cameras placed in and around school buildings. Cameras have proven to be a strong deterrent and very effective in helping to ensure policies and procedures are being followed, as well as providing evidence in forensic situations. They also provide a critical live insight for first responders during an emergency.

Even though school security has received greater attention since Columbine and Sandy Hook, it's obvious we still need to do more.

Public officials, school administrators, teachers, parents and even students need to be willing to make changes, but those need to be intelligent changes that make use of the proper security technology, policies and procedures – and even the element of surprise – to make our campuses safer and more secure.

Let's work together to protect our schools and our children.

About the Author:

Patrick V. Fiel, Sr. is the founder of PVF Security Consulting. He has over 35 years of experience managing security and law enforcement organizations. He has served as the public safety advisor for ADT Security Services, Executive Director of security for the Washington, D.C. Public School System, and is retired from the U.S. Army Military Police Corps. He can be reached at (910) 789-4265 or at pvfiel@gmail.com.