



Becker Morgan Group Emphasizes Student-Focused Safety & Security in School Design: Part 3

Promoting Immediate & Effective Response

In previous segments of this three-part safety and security series, we discussed how building design can create secure educational environments conducive to the emotional experience of learning, and site design strategies that are beneficial to a safe and secure environment. In this final segment, we will discuss how design can impact the threat incident and enhance effective response from public safety and medical agencies. We will also discuss the importance of emergency planning.

Threats & Hazards

A comprehensive school safety initiative should address all types of threats and hazards. The Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center identifies four types listed below.

- Natural Hazards: Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados, floods
- Technological Hazards: Power outages, chemical incidents
- Biological Hazards: Viruses, bacteria, molds
- Adversarial, Incident & Human-Caused Threats: Bullying, vandalism, student fights, school shootings

The primary focus of this discussion is designing for **Adversarial, Incident, and Human-Caused Threats**.



Secure Perimeters

To design against external threats, building systems should help delay, impede, and stall movement into and within a school building. The first line of defense is a secure vestibule at the main building entrance. The vestibule should be designed to control visitor access from the exterior into the vestibule, from the vestibule into the administrative office, and from the office into the school. Although cost-prohibitive on some projects, to maintain an inviting but secure public entrance, some school districts choose – and some states such as Delaware require – the installation of ballistic rated glass in vestibule storefront and doors, and ballistic resistant materials in all vestibules, lobbies and office areas used to screen visitors to provide a second level of defense to these prominent public spaces. All other exterior doors should be locked, and access controlled with an alarm notification if the door is propped open or unlatched.



For emergency accessibility and orienting of responders, some jurisdictions require consecutive numbering on exterior doors on both the interior and exterior of the building. Numbering starts at the main entrance and continues along the perimeter of the building at each door providing direct access to the school. Establishing protocols, building tours, and conducting drills in conjunction with community emergency organizations will familiarize responders with the school in the event of a hazard or threat.



When possible, interior classroom doors should be locked to control access from corridors. Windows from corridors into classrooms and view panels in classroom doors are recommended to put “education on display” and provide administrators with a non-disrupting view for monitoring classroom activities, but rooms should be designed to provide an area where students can shelter in place out of sight, visibly shielding them from an unwelcome visitor in the corridor.



To design against interior threats such as bullying and student fights, the public, collaborative, and common areas should be open, accommodating full visibility for staff supervision. As discussed in previous segments, visibility alone can deter misbehavior. For example, positioning a regularly occupied staff lounge or workroom adjacent with fire-rated glass overlooking the stairwell. See Part 1 of this series for other design measures supporting a student’s perception of safety.



Communication Systems

Communication systems should be installed to monitor, identify, and contain the movements of students, as well as wanted and unwanted visitors. These systems include:

- Perimeter access controls at windows and doors
- Exterior and interior video surveillance
- TV monitors in reception areas, corridors, and common spaces
- Card access and specialized door locks
- Rescue assistance communications
- Emergency responder radio antenna-repeater
- Appropriate monitoring capabilities and infrastructure

The appropriate security monitoring infrastructure, paired with trained staff members who are familiar with a building's layout, will improve the response capabilities if unwanted visitors pass through primary perimeter boundaries. For example, the ability to remotely secure zones of a building through access control without impeding code required exit paths would reduce the threat to isolated areas of a school. This, coupled with emergency responder communication and familiarity with the building, narrows focus to an isolated area and could reduce the duration of the threat.



This level of discussion should begin during schematic design and impacts how a school is configured overall. Can multiple security zones within the whole building be accommodated within site parameters? This could impact the placement of classrooms and gathering areas relative to entry points and emergency access routes. Constant communication with teachers and staff will assist their decision making and awareness to react during a threat, including where to shelter safely in place and which exit paths are still available to select. This proactive approach could be a differentiator to the overall outcome of a situation.



Emergency Planning

Unfortunately, good building design and communication systems are not enough. Excellent resources are available to assist in developing district-wide and school-specific comprehensive security and emergency plans. All stakeholders – students, staff, and community leaders – should be involved in the development of these plans. In an active emergency, occupants should know when to enter lockdown, evacuate, or shelter-in-place. Additionally, providing staff with communication resources and the emotional training to properly handle and de-escalate threats between students, parents, and staff could prevent future, more harmful situations.



Creating a Culture of School Safety

Constant threat assessment and awareness is an overall strategy to improve school safety and offer secure learning environments. Promoting a school culture of respect, mentorship, and awareness is critical to perceived student safety and violence-reduction daily. Schools in which students are comfortable expressing concerns and talking to adult staff members, without fear of dismissal or reprisal, provide the foresight to identify and manage pre-attack behaviors.



Paying attention to a student's social and emotional needs, as well as their academic needs, can reduce fearful and fierce behaviors leading to psychological and physical violence in schools. Eliminating the "code of silence" opens communication between students and adults, including the freedom to express concerns about a peer's behavior, but also provides resources and support to navigate their own pain or problems. Important information about dangerous plans will be heard and considered good citizenship, instead of remaining a secret that evolves into an act of violence.



Conclusion

School safety is everyone's responsibility. A culture of school safety leads to environments where teasing and bullying are not accepted or tolerated as part of adolescent behavior. If indications arise that a student, parent, community member, etc. presents a threat to the school community, school administrators and law enforcement need to quickly and efficiently intervene and address. Special building systems and protocols are only fully effective when properly maintained and updated. A single propped door, broken camera, or poorly functioning communication system can ruin the best of emergency plans. Systems must be maintained, and staff and students trained, to know what to do when a situation occurs.

Resources

Readiness & Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center
<https://rems.ed.gov/K12ThreatAndHSAnnex.aspx>

K-12 Emergency Management Planning
<https://rems.ed.gov/K12ThreatAndHSAnnex.aspx>

Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations
<https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/threatassessmentguide.pdf>