

COLLABORATING FOR Safer Schools

How K-12 education and public safety officials
are working together to enhance security.



INTRODUCTION

Efforts to keep students safe extend beyond school walls — both in the real world and online. Today, it's common for K-12 schools to coordinate physical and digital security efforts with local law enforcement, first responders and other community organizations. More than two-thirds of first responders report collaborating with school districts on safety, training, planning or other activities, according to a 2018 Center for Digital Education (CDE) survey of 290 K-12 education leaders and public safety officials.¹

In many places, both emergency planning efforts and personnel like school resource officers are benefitting from new practices, such as sharing video from security cameras, messaging and communication technologies, and collaboration on training. This white paper explores opportunities and challenges with these partnerships and identifies strategies to improve collaboration between K-12 schools and their communities to keep students and staff safe and campuses secure.

CONNECTING SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

Ensuring student safety has always been a priority for school leaders, but the ways in which they collaborate with law enforcement and other public safety organizations have expanded dramatically over the last several decades.

The rise of community policing programs in the 1980s and 1990s increased law enforcement's visibility in school settings, with school resource officers appearing on many campuses. Today, nearly half (42 percent) of public K-12 schools and approximately 20 percent of all schools have

school resource officers on site at least one day a week, according to an analysis of statistics compiled by the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO).²

High-profile security incidents in the decades that followed prompted the Homeland Security and Education Departments to publish a report in 2013 detailing the importance of collaboration between schools and first responders in developing formal emergency operations plans. Many states have since required districts to develop such plans. In addition, the National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) issued a 2018 report encouraging districts to collaborate with community public safety and mental health officials to develop targeted violence prevention plans, including specific protocols to identify and report potentially troubling behaviors, as well as broader efforts to promote safe school climates for all students.

This spotlight on school safety highlights the need for collaboration, but also illuminates longstanding tensions, says Desmond Racicot, a former police officer, detective and chief who serves as a Cisco senior advisor for public safety and defense.

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Rick Robinson, Director of Technology and Safety Coordinator, Walton Central School District

“The role of the school is to educate and to have an environment that’s welcoming,” he says. “On the same token, you have to have facilities that are safe. The challenge is to provide a welcoming educational environment as well as safety, where the things we put in place don’t distract from the objective of having a proper educational environment.”

TECHNOLOGY AS AN ENABLER

Technology can play a key role in coordinated efforts to keep schools safe.

“You need to have a multi-tiered approach,” says Racicot. “We have policies and procedures, and technology is the third part of the conversation.”

While cameras and other security systems have been present in schools for decades, advances in technology are allowing officials to use them in more proactive ways, including:

 **CAMERAS.** Security cameras once were largely used to determine what happened after an incident. Today, smarter cameras can automatically trigger alerts involving suspicious activity or objects, turn lights on when someone enters a parking lot at night, and send video footage to an officer when an alarm is pressed, without human intervention. With video analytic capabilities, leaders can find incidents faster and start learning what areas need extra security. Systems today also allow schools to easily share live camera feeds and past footage with law enforcement in real time. Video surveillance also can be integrated with geofencing — automatically alerting staff when a suspicious package is left in a public place, or another incident, such as excessive crowds, intruders or smoke from a fire, is detected in specific areas.

 **ACCESS CONTROL SYSTEMS.** Door access systems now serve multiple, proactive purposes, such as limiting access to certain areas if a connected smoke detector is triggered. Alarmed access control systems also automatically notify staff and, at times, the broader school community when unauthorized entry occurs.



Consensus and Challenges

More than three-quarters of public safety leaders (79 percent) say their local school districts work well with their organizations, according to the CDE survey. But some key differences in priorities exist.

While addressing intruders entering school buildings is the top priority of both school and public safety leaders, educators are notably more likely to consider cybersecurity a priority than first responders. Conversely, nearly two-thirds of first responders prioritize ensuring student and staff safety during natural disasters, compared to just over half of educators.

Educators also place greater emphasis on cybersecurity monitoring and on-campus mental health staff than their public safety counterparts. Public safety leaders see greater need for training and are more critical of the level of coordination between schools and their agencies.³

Key Planning Principles

Emergency planning involves more than coordinating the immediate response. Borrowing from federal preparedness initiatives, plans often incorporate five key areas: prevention, protection, mitigation, response and recovery. Guiding principles include:

- **Planning must be supported** by leadership at the district and school levels.
- **Planning uses assessments** to customize plans to the building level and takes into consideration each school's unique circumstances and resources.
- **Planning considers all potential threats** and hazards to address safety needs, including natural disasters and other external factors.
- **Planning provides** for the access and functional needs of the whole school community, including students and adults with disabilities, those from diverse backgrounds and those with limited English proficiency.
- **Planning considers** all settings and times, including incidents that happen beyond the school day or off campus, such as field trips or sporting events.
- **Planning involves** following a collaborative process, including district staff, community partners, first responders, local emergency management staff, and public and mental health officials.

Source: U.S. Departments of Education and Homeland Security

 **NOTIFICATIONS.** Notification systems increasingly allow school leaders to alert students and staff to security incidents or natural disasters via speakers, flashing lights, message boards, and their own mobile devices or laptops.

 **COLLABORATION TOOLS.** Virtual conferencing technology and other online collaboration tools allow for better coordination among teams of school and central office staff, public safety officials and mental health providers. Some systems allow students, staff and community members to anonymously report tips.

 **ANALYTICS.** Video cameras, access control systems, and the ID cards or key fobs required to use them can provide data that can be analyzed to yield important insights on traffic patterns into and within buildings, resulting in better emergency planning.

The key to the evolution of these capabilities is the integration of once separate systems. Connected smoke detectors, for example, can automatically trigger emergency notifications. Even smart classroom technologies such as digital whiteboards can be tied into notification systems and display alerts in emergencies.

It's critical, though, that these systems are easy to use and understand.

"If systems are hard to use for faculty, that's a disadvantage," Racicot says. "They create pain points."

OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT

Extending integrated technology beyond school walls represents an opportunity to address a key challenge for first responders, experts say.

"One of the biggest hurdles has been reaction time of law enforcement once they get to the school," says Rick Robinson, director of technology and safety coordinator for the Walton Central School District in upstate New York. "If we can provide local law enforcement with the streams of our live cameras, they'll be able to get a feel of what's going on and not have to sit away from the school to gather the information. When they're here, they're ready to react to the situation."

Along with providing access to video feeds, some schools and public safety organizations are investing in systems facilitating direct two-way communication between school

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personnel and first responders. The city of Brewer, Maine, for example, deployed technology that provides police with a real-time chat window and information about specific schools as they respond to incidents, eliminating the need to relay information through 911 dispatchers.⁴

However, extending collaborative efforts into the technical realm remains a relatively uncommon practice. According to the 2018 CDE survey, only about half of respondents say that school and public safety technologies are compatible. Fewer still — 39 percent of educators and 33 percent of public safety respondents — say the technology is actively used by representatives of both organizations in their communities. At the same time, only five percent of educators report their districts aren't interested in adopting compatible technology, suggesting opportunities to improve interoperability.⁵

THE CYBERSECURITY QUESTION

Internet-based threats to student and campus safety continue to grow. Eighty-five percent of schools reported facing greater cybersecurity threats than in years past, according to a 2018 CDE survey.⁶ Respondents were least confident in addressing social media threats, but nearly two-thirds offer professional development to employees and actively monitor network traffic.⁷

Despite increased collaboration between school and public safety officials on physical security, less emphasis has been placed on how public safety agencies can help secure digital systems. One notable exception involves following up on threats or suspicious behavior reported on social media. In Fort Worth, Texas, for example, law enforcement officers respond to social media issues reported by school officials at all hours, including home visits.⁸

STRATEGIES FOR COLLABORATION

More than a decade of federal government efforts to provide guidance for coordination have resulted in clear roadmaps for school leaders and public safety organizations to work together on school safety. First responders and other public safety organizations are familiar with these frameworks from their own coordination with state and federal officials, which helps provide a common language for cooperative efforts.

Among other strategies to improve collaboration:

 **START AT THE TOP.** “You need support from people at higher levels,” says Robinson. “We have a board and superintendent who realize the importance of school safety and actively encourage us to grow in that regard.”

 **ENCOURAGE ACCESS.** Along with school resource officers, the presence of other public safety officials



In Upstate New York, 'One is None and Two is Done'

Located in rural upstate New York, the Walton Central School District is home to just under 1,000 K-12 students in three schools. While the district has been credited for its proactive safety planning, officials knew their procedures needed improvement. For example, in emergency drills, staff used handheld radios to contact the central office, which would then page lockdown orders and call 911.

“There were a ton of manual steps involved,” says Robinson. “Our main goal was to select a system to cut down on the number of manual steps.”

As part of a network upgrade, Walton integrated video cameras, door access control and emergency notification technology, which now sends information to computer desktops, interactive whiteboards and VoIP phones, along with digital message boards and networked speakers in each school.

“Right from the start, our number one goal was ensuring all critical communications can be consolidated into one emergency notification system. Getting the message out as quickly as possible dramatically increases safety,” Robinson says.

Equally important, security procedures such as lockdowns can be triggered from a variety of sources, including cellphones, helping reduce the reaction time to incidents.

“It's a highly redundant system so if one set of endpoints fails, like desktop notifications, alerts can still come out of the speakers in the hallway,” Robinson says. “I have a motto when I talk about our network — one is none and two is done. We've really provided that redundancy.”

can serve as a deterrent within schools. Also, the more time first responders spend in school buildings, the more familiar they'll be with their layout if emergencies do arise.

For example, in Walton, local police have long had access to the district's buildings using a physical key. But the district recently added the sheriff's department and state police's personal ID badges to its door access control system.

"It led to a greater presence because it's easier to get into the building," Robinson says.



BUILD BROAD COALITIONS. Many districts meet regularly with local law enforcement and other first responders, but it's a best practice to expand the number of organizations at the table. For example, the NTAC guidelines encourage collaboration with mental health officials, public health departments and other groups in discussions about identifying concerning behaviors. Districts also should ensure their own counseling and support staff, along with faculty and administrators, have a role in planning.

To keep coalitions strong, key stakeholders should meet regularly and develop information-sharing protocols. It's also important to incorporate voices from the broader community, says Racicot, which helps keep unintentional biases from being translated into policies and procedures.



COORDINATE TRAINING. Most districts include coordinated drills and other training as part of their emergency plans.

"The main focus is to make sure everyone knows their roles and responsibilities in times of crisis," says Robinson.

Online training represents another option to strengthen staff readiness, as vendors offer courses on a range of

school safety topics, including intruder and natural disaster response and bullying prevention. It's important to ensure that lockdown drills and other exercises are unpredictable.

"You may have an important lesson plan or the police department is short staffed on a certain day — but that's what happens in life," Racicot says.

Also ensure both school and public safety officials review results regularly to address shortcomings. In Walton, for example, recent lockdown drills identified the need to change protocols about triggering alerts, according to Robinson.



LEVERAGE TECHNOLOGY. Security features should be considerations whenever a district looks to upgrade or implement new technology like new networks, collaboration tools or telephony systems. One key, experts say, is investing in technology that serves multiple purposes, like integrated networks that handle both educational and security objectives. An example is the connectivity that powers both classroom collaboration tools and security camera coordination.

"When we use technology, we have to take a multidisciplinary approach," says Racicot. "We have to include the needs of faculty members, administrators, public safety, community members and students."

It's also important to think about how new tools can enhance current technology. For example, access control systems programmed to alert safety officials when a door is left open for more than a certain amount of time should be accompanied by policies on how to educate staff and students who may be propping doors open without being aware of the risks of doing so.

There's nuance involved in these considerations. For example, more than 30 automated email alerts about propped doors have been triggered daily across Walton's three schools since

In Metro Detroit, the Big Picture

With its 20-by-50-foot video wall and more than 50 individual monitors, Macomb County's Communications and Technology Center is one of the most advanced local operations centers of its kind in the country, according to officials in the Michigan county. While the \$12 million center was primarily built to monitor road conditions and flooding, in 2018 school districts in the Metro Detroit region began providing the facility access to their security cameras.

"We can click on cameras and see exactly what is happening in that facility. It gives us an excellent advantage. We can zoom in, do rotation in a room, so if someone is hiding in a room, we can see that live," Macomb County Executive Mark Hackel told the Detroit News. "When you have officers responding from a SWAT team, you have one of their commanders talking to them live as they are going through that school."⁹



its access control system was set up earlier this year. However, as a rural school district with shop doors and activities requiring equipment be moved in and out of buildings, for now the district is categorizing the reasons for the triggers and will develop a targeted plan. In the meantime, even informal conversations are improving awareness and reducing the number of doors left open, according to Robinson.

“Even without having a plan in place, the staff is reacting appropriately,” he says.

 **CONSIDER THE OBSTACLES TO SHARING SYSTEMS.** Since it’s rare that schools share a common IT environment with law enforcement or first responders, expect challenges to sharing access. For school officials, an important first step is to identify who in public safety agencies is responsible for IT and learn about their policies involving network access and installing software on devices such as laptops in police cars.

“It’s hard to coordinate all the moving pieces to get it done,” Robinson says.

The good news is that funding may be available for technology upgrades. For example, Pennsylvania’s Franklin Regional School District and its local police department funded the purchase of software connecting the district’s 128 security cameras in five schools to in-car laptops through a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice’s Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program.¹⁰

It’s also important to remember that providing law enforcement with access to video feeds and other

systems is a policy issue, often determined by the school board or other senior leadership, who must balance privacy considerations with the benefits of stronger coordination. In some districts, policies or memorandums of understanding restrict law enforcement access to video feeds except during emergencies or outside of regular school hours, or spell out who has access to them and in what circumstances.

 **DON’T NEGLECT DIGITAL SECURITY TRAINING.** Along with ensuring systems are protected, training is critical for both staff and students. Focus on day-to-day threats, such as phishing, malware, and issues involving social media.

“We live in a click-happy society, and a great deal of crime can be averted with better awareness and habits,” says Robinson.

When possible, consider including public safety officials in efforts to train students and staff. For example, as part of the Walton district’s annual training on “digital citizenship,” New York state police officers discuss the responsible use of social media with students.

 **EMPHASIZE ONGOING CONNECTIONS.** Even when technology is leveraged effectively, ensuring all of a community’s resources are brought to bear on keeping schools safe requires ongoing communication between school officials and public safety organizations. “We still need to get people together,” Racicot says.

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For More Information:

Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety

www2.ed.gov/documents/school-safety/school-safety-report.pdf

DHS K-12 School Security Guide for Preventing and Protecting Against Gun Violence

www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/K12-School-Security-Guide-2nd-Edition-508.pdf

DHS/U.S. Education Department Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans

rems.ed.gov/docs/REMS_K-12_Guide_508.pdf

NTAC Guide to Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model

www.secretservice.gov/protection/ntac/

DoJ Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS)

cops.usdoj.gov/supportingsafeschools

Other DHS Programs and Resources

www.dhs.gov/other-federal-programs-and-resources

CDE Community Approaches to Safer Schools Survey

www.govtech.com/education/papers/Community-Approaches-to-Safer-Schools-110966.html?promo_code=CDE_web_library_list

Endnotes

1. https://www.govtech.com/education/papers/Community-Approaches-to-Safer-Schools-110966.html?promo_code=related
2. <https://nasro.org/frequently-asked-questions/>
3. https://www.govtech.com/education/papers/Community-Approaches-to-Safer-Schools-110966.html?promo_code=related
4. <https://www.govtech.com/em/safety/New-Software-Eliminates-the-Red-Tape-of-a-911-Phone-Call.html>
5. https://www.govtech.com/education/papers/Community-Approaches-to-Safer-Schools-110966.html?promo_code=related
6. https://www.govtech.com/education/papers/K-12-Cybersecurity-Preparing-for-Threats-110404.html?promo_code=CDE_web_library_list
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10. <https://www.govtech.com/public-safety/Pennsylvania-Police-Departments-Connect-Wirelessly-to.html>



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