What Works in Active Threat Incidents

Best Practices for the K-12 Environment

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As school security professional for more than 30 years, I have responded to many kinds of emergencies and situations. School districts face safety and security challenges that are multifaceted and complex and must be prepared to address a full range of situations that pose risks to students and staff, including everyday occurrences like weather emergencies; however, the most serious and life changing events I have responded to include "active threats," including an active shooter attack on one of our high schools, suicides with firearms on campus and many threats of violence towards the schools. An active threat is any situation that presents an immediate danger to school occupants. In addition to individuals using firearms, other types of weapons and behaviors could also create active threat situations.

When it comes to preventing school violence, districts must strike an effective balance between physical security measures and human behavioral prevention approaches. In February a study was released on averted and completed incidents recorded in the U.S. Department of Justice Averted School Violence (ASV) database, which makes clear that different types of attacks pose different prevention challenges. According to the study, schools "have the chance to pick up on warning signs and intervene" with insiders like current or recent students or employees, but when the attacker is "someone with no connection to the school, the school usually has no way of anticipating the attack." In the event other prevention efforts fail, facility security measures are critical to protection, mitigation and response.

Here are my observations on what worked well as well as some of the shortcomings that became evident during active threat incidents. The best practice recommendations below align with the PASS Safety and Security Guidelines for K-12 Schools, and I encourage you to check out this PASS resource for additional information and to learn more.

The Place to Start

Staff responsible for school safety and security need district leadership at the superintendent and board levels to build holistic safety programs. Coordination with executive management at the district level is integral to the successful development and adoption of school safety processes, plans, technologies and procedures and for ensuring these measures are updated for consistency with evolving best practices. Most school safety measures have district-wide components and responsibilities. It is critical for district leadership to understand the fundamental link between readiness for day-to-day emergencies and disaster preparedness. School districts that are well prepared for individual emergencies involving students or staff members are more likely to be prepared for complex events like a community disaster or an active shooter incident.

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Create a Safety Team

Security planning teams should include key stakeholders in the K-12 environment. The process of forming a team should be led by an experienced security director, if a district is fortunate enough to have full-time staff in this position, or a staff member who has security as a primary responsibility. Start with a basic team including:

- Security director

- School administrators (across functions such as operations, mental health,secretarial and human resources)

- Security/systems integrator and/or consultant

- IT director

- Local police and fire officials

This team must be given the flexibility to form the district's safety processes, plans, technologies and procedures. Having a team that represents a broad range of responsibilities and expertise helps to address all the potential hazards a school district may face. Each safety team member should understand the layered approach to security outlined in the PASS Guidelines and recognized in other school security resources.
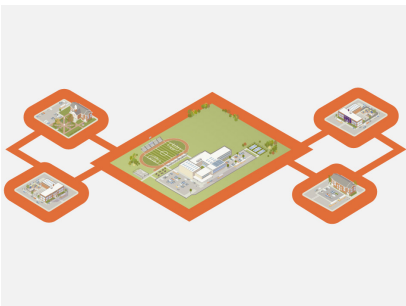
Layers of Protection

District-Wide Layer

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Property Perimeter Layer

The property perimeter layer begins at the school property boundary and extends to the parking lot. This area includes playgrounds, sporting fields and other facilities that are often used by the public after school business hours end. The physical security of a school facility begins at the property perimeter, where the most outwardly visible security deterrents to an external threat can be implemented.

Parking Lot Perimeter Layer

Within the parking lot perimeter, staff, students and visitors park their vehicles or arrive and depart by bus or other means. Just like the property perimeter layer, the parking lot perimeter should always be clearly defined. In many cases, this area is where schools experience the most safety issues.

District-wide Llayer, property perimeter layer, and parking lot perimeter layer.

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Building perimeter layer and classroom/interior perimeter layer
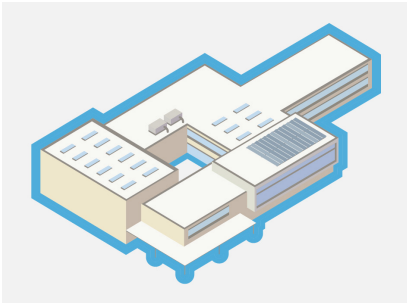
Building Perimeter Layer

The building perimeter layer begins with school grounds adjacent to the exterior structure of a building and consists of the perimeter of a building itself, including the exterior doors and windows of a school. Securing a building perimeter can range from simple to complex, especially for middle schools or high schools with multiple buildings/open campuses. Key safety and security functions take place within this layer, as it encompasses all areas where people enter and exit a school building.

Classroom/Interior Perimeter Layer

The classroom/interior perimeter layer consists of a school's entire interior, including not only classrooms but also gymnasiums, cafeterias, media centers, etc. This is both the last layer of defense against external threats and, often, the first protection against internal threats to student, staff and visitor safety.

Understand the Risk at Your Schools

A risk assessment is the first step toward developing a comprehensive security plan and thus a prerequisite for decisions regarding deployment of security solutions to address the potential for active threats. Several options for conducting risks assessments are available through:

- Local police and fire officials (ability varies by jurisdiction)
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security Protective Security Advisers
- Independent consultants
- Security design consultants/systems integrators
- Internal assessment using free assessment tools
- Assessment by local subject matter experts assembled by districts

Regardless of what method is chosen, it's important to understand that risk assessment and mitigation can never eliminate risk; however, risks can be identified, measured and reduced.

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What Has Worked During Active Threat Incidents

Essential Policies and Procedures

Equipping and empowering staff and students to make response decisions is the single most important factor in mitigating active threats. I saw firsthand during an active shooter attack on one of the schools in my district that immediate actions by staff and students had a direct limiting effect on the ability of the perpetrator to cause further harm after an initial attack.

Both staff and students should receive age-appropriate training and drills that emphasize survival skills and decision options. In my district, our core active threat protocol consists of four situation-dependent options: SHELTER-EVADE-DEFEND-CARE.

- **SHELTER:** Alert others. Any staff member should be able to initiate a lockdown when they detect a threat. Call 911 when safe to do so. Lock the door(s) and shut off the lights. Get students, staff and visitors quiet in a low position behind large items that might provide extra protection out of corridor line of sight, and ready to move if necessary. Account for those in your care. Do not open the doors for anyone – responders will come to you. If in a corridor, shelter in the nearest safe room. If the fire alarm goes off (during an active threat situation) stay where you are unless threatened by smoke and fire. Be prepared to EVADE-DEFEND-CARE.
- **EVADE:** If not able to get to a safe location in the building, identify and run away from commotion. Find the nearest exit and flee to a safe location. In a classroom consider your door and window escape options if the threat approaches. If a threat is nearby and you cannot seek cover safely, seek concealment (hide). If outside, flee away from the threat in the opposite direction to the nearest safe cover. Call 911 when safe. Be prepared to SHELTER-DEFEND-CARE.
- **DEFEND:** As a last resort and only if your life is in imminent danger, attempt to incapacitate a threatening person by any means possible. Be prepared to EVADE-SHELTER-CARE.
- **CARE:** Call 911. Be a leader. Reassure and provide comfort to those around you or in your care. Give emergency first aid to the best of your abilities to those who are injured. Be prepared to EVADE-SHELTER-DEFEND.

Supporting this active threat protocol are standard emergency procedures that every employee should be trained to independently initiate during both active threats and other scenarios as needed:

- **Lockdown.** A lockdown usually involves locking and closing doors, moving students out of sight and requiring students to remain quiet within the room. Lockdowns should continue to be included in any an options-based approach to active assailant training, which provide students and staff with a range of alternative strategies to save lives and the permission to use them, considering variables such as the nature of the threat, time of day and location of students. Like other safety drills (e.g., fire or tornado), it is important that the ages and developmental levels of students and the physical layout of the school campus (e.g., ease of access to outside doors and proximity of places to hide other than classrooms) are considered when communicating to students and staff concerning lockdown.
- **Secured Perimeter (Lockout).** A secured perimeter addresses threats outside the building, often initiated when there are emergency situations taking place in neighborhoods nearby, such as a crime in progress, police activity or a dangerous animal in the area.

- **Shelter in Place.** Shelter in place is initiated in situations that may require staff and students to shelter in their classrooms or work areas; it is more restrictive than a secured perimeter, as staff and students are not allowed to move within the building. Unlike in a lockdown, however, staff and students can remain at desks or work spaces. Shelter in place is generally initiated when there is a possibility that an area emergency may escalate and having students and staff sheltered behind locked doors may be critical to safety and order.

- **Evacuation.** The purpose of an evacuation is to quickly get students and staff out of the building by a route designed to avoid contact with a potential threat, generally avoiding the location of a known threat inside the building, such as a suspicious package, a threatening person in a specific confined area or a hazardous material spill.

- **Reverse Evacuation.** A reverse evacuation procedure is used to get students and staff into the safety of a building to avoid contact with a potential threat when the location of the threat outside the building is known.

- **Room Clear.** A room clear procedure is initiated by a teacher or supervising adult to send students away from a potential threat, such as a student acting out in a violent manner; it is also used when the teacher must remain in the dangerous situation but can send students to a designated safe area.

Proven emergency response planning, methods and training should be established at the district level to ensure the most effective responses when procedures are activated. School districts should formally adopt through board policy the National Response Framework (NRF) and National Incident Management System (NIMS) developed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. When adopting NRF and NIMS, a school district should implement an incident command system (ICS) within the entire organization as the coordinating link between multiple agencies and jurisdictions in an emergency response.

In my district for example, we have established teams of professionals in the following roles to address active threat incidents (and other incidents) as well as the aftermath.

- District crisis response team (ICS)
- Building crisis response team (ICS)
- District safety planning team
- Building safety planning team
- Multi-agency crisis planning team (can be combined with the district safety planning team)
- Threat assessment team
- Psychological recovery team

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Key Technologies

Mechanical Door Locks

Although hard-wired electronic access control systems offer the most secure solutions, they may not always be the most viable option for all openings due to budget constraints. Securing doors with a key-controlled master key system is one of the most cost-effective means of securing a facility. Based on my experience in responding to active threat incidents, I believe the ability to a lock a door must be given to staff and students (e.g., physical locks that can be engaged by a push button or lever from the inside of the classroom). While some stakeholders may have concerns with giving giving students the ability to lock a door, active threat incidents could come at any time, including when a teacher is not in a classroom or when students may need to use an unoccupied room for shelter. Students of all ages should be empowered to know how to lock a classroom door and when to do so.

Radio Communications

Radio communications technology is tremendous asset that is essential to a school's emergency preparedness needs. Localized radios allow constant communications about what is happening on school grounds. In fact, radios are even utilized more than phones because of how often the employees and students are on the go. The most frequent emergencies that many districts face are related to the weather. Many school districts are starting to utilize the 800mhz radio systems that police and fire officials use. 800mhz systems are also known as "trunked" radio systems. A trunked radio system allows organization of users into different groups and provides the capability to communicate on frequencies used by police, fire, emergency medical services and other first responders in the community, whereas traditional two-way radio systems may be confined to a certain band (frequency) exclusive to the system. Any school district that does not have the capability to have radio interoperability with law enforcement and fire to explore the possibility. Trunked radio systems are the most reliable communication tool, as cellular networks can and do become easily overwhelmed during emergencies.

Video Management Systems

Video surveillance can be used to address risks within the classroom, interior and exterior perimeters by providing surveillance, assessment, forensics and risk mitigation. Having a visual record of student, staff, faculty and visitor activity throughout the day provides another layer of deterrence for unwanted activities. Often, people who plan to commit horrific acts perform site surveillance and probing before an act. Detecting this activity and acting upon it can thwart a hostile act before it begins. A vide management system (VMS) also provides valuable situational awareness during emergencies. Having designated personnel who understand and are trained to use the camera feeds in an emergency is critical. At minimum, these staff should be equipped to use radio systems to communicate to other responders on what is being observed in real time.

School District Security Operations Center

Particularly in large districts, a school can be compared to a city, and when you have multiple schools it is like working with multiple cities. Each school has its own community and culture with potentially hundreds of staff and thousands of students on the campuses. Just like in cities, there are emergencies every day, around the clock. Having a district security operations center can help manage respond to these emergencies in the most coordinated manner and provide situational real-time information to responders.

Access Control Systems

Access control systems are no longer just concerned with card access. These systems are the backbone of a school or district's entire physical security system. Effective and efficient access control will unify other safety and security technologies (video, alarms and fire) so that they can be utilized in many different productive ways. A unified security system is a force multiplier which empowers personnel district-wide to have a hand in helping keep the schools safe.

Visitor Management Systems

Visitor management systems streamline the visitor sign-in process and track specific visitor data such as who is entering the school and when, the reason for the visit, and who was visited. Additionally, many systems record photos of the visitors or scan driver's licenses that are presented by visitors. This not only helps confirm the identity of the presenter, but also checks for persons that should not be permitted to enter for a variety of reasons, such as restraining orders or parental rights disputes. Some systems check driver's license data against the National Sex Offender Database or even run full criminal background checks. Some of the most threatening situations schools face involve potentially hostile visitors such as disgruntled parents and guests.

Video Intercom Buzz-In System

A video intercom should always be used when there is no direct line of sight to the person that is screening incoming visitors. These devices enable schools to speak with and observe visitors at main entrances and any other areas, such as loading docks, where people other than students, faculty and staff need to enter the building. The use of networked video intercoms is recommended, enabling screening from multiple devices such as a monitor in the front office or on mobile devices if needed. Networked video intercoms can also be recorded on the VMS, providing a visual record of activities at entrance points. The intercom should be integrated with an electronic access control system to enable screeners to unlock the door remotely, regardless of the monitoring device they are using.

Motion Detectors, Door Contacts and Beam Detectors

Time-tested intrusion detection technologies that protect school facilities from burglary and theft are also very valuable in active threat situations. Door contacts can be used to monitor doors for open status during business hours. Motion detectors can be used in search and rescue efforts during an incident.

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Duress

Most intrusion detection systems provide the ability to add new devices to the system in a cost-effective manner. One use of the intrusion system is to allow for duress/panic buttons or devices to be installed that provide users with the ability to trigger alarms for a variety of life safety threats. Such devices should be installed in the main office and other public areas that would immediately communicate – and differentiate between – different types of emergencies or threats. Ensuring audio and video feeds in these areas should also be considered.

Remote and Mobile Lockdown Capability

Districts should strive to provide staff in each facility with the ability to lockdown both internally and externally, initiate mass notification and alert responders to emergencies. This can include wearable pendants or other technologies that make it possible to initiate these communications both inside and outside of a school.

Mass Notification

Communication systems should be integrated with the district-wide mass notification system. Within this integration, the school can receive instant alerts for weather and other emergencies that can affect the school. There are a variety of technologies to interface the in-building communication systems to wide-area systems.

Special Note on Fire Alarms

It is very possible that during an active threat incident a fire alarm will be initiated from gun smoke, fire or just a panicked person pulling a fire alarm. It is important for a school district to work with their local fire department to work out a solution to over-ride a fire alarm in an active shooter incident. Staff and students must also be taught that in an active threat incident that the rules are active Treat response first and fire drills second.

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Prevention, Preparation and Recovery

Empower the Community to Share Concerns Through Anonymous Reporting

Communities must leverage available tools and technology that can help stop school violence before it starts.Use of communications tools allowing students and others in the community to anonymously report potential threats and other concerns has demonstrated success in preventing potential violence. Students often know long before adults do what is occurring in their schools and communities, including fighting and bullying, substance abuse, dangerous and concerning behaviors, threats, depression, suicidal statements and self-injury, witnessed either in-person or online. Some states like Colorado mandate that public schools implement tip line programs. Tip reporting processes should be simple; providing students, parents and community members with a safe way to report information about any issues that concern their safety or the safety of others. It should also meet the following criteria:

- The anonymity of every report should be guaranteed—no caller ID or data tracking.

- The program should be available to all members of the community.

- Calls should be answered immediately, and service should be available 24 hours a day, every day of the week.

- Every tip should be investigated.

Mental Preparation/Resiliency

Active threat situations are highly stressful to those involved in many ways. Responders who are responsible for district safety must be trained and ready to work through the shock and the pressure of the moment. One area of preparedness often overlooked is the effects of live viewing/monitoring of these incidents via modern technology. This can be traumatic for security operators and other staff who are seeing live images of an incident and trying to coordinate a response to an active threat that may be miles away.

Aftermath

Now comes the investigation of the incident. This can be a difficult time since the incident now reverts to a crime scene investigation. Due to the investigation it may be days or months until cleanup and building recovery efforts can begin. This can also be a traumatic time because the crime scenes can be quite disturbing for safety and security staff. In the days, weeks, months and years after a violent event, district and even individual responders will face tremendous scrutiny. Any negative media, hostility expressed by the community and attacks on social media can cause distractions and stress. It is important that team members support each other through these processes from beginning to end.

Conclusion

Violence, injury and loss of life in our schools are a tragedy. Thankfully, most school emergencies are more routine. That is why it is imperative that districts implement solutions that can help address a broad range multiple hazards that could face staff, students and visitors on any given day. Again, check out the PASS Safety and Security Guidelines for K-12 Schools for additional information on best practices for addressing active threats.

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