Partnership Alliance for Safer Schools

WHITE PAPER: Visitor Management Systems

The volunteers who make up the Partner Alliance for Safer Schools (PASS) bring together their research and expertise from the education, public safety and industry communities to develop and support a coordinated approach to make effective use of proven security practices for schools. The PASS team is also dedicated to developing white papers on specific, school-safety topics.

The content in these white papers may point to specific products, brands, or organizations as illustrations of how certain safety and security measures are implemented. PASS does not endorse specific products or brands. Together, the volunteers and partners of the PASS share a single vision: making all schools safer is both achievable and urgently needed.

AUTHORS

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KEY TOPIC

Visitor Management System Best Practices to Enhance School Safety and Security

PROBLEM SOLVED

Visitor management systems are crucial for K-12 schools because they enhance security and safety on campus. These systems provide a streamlined and efficient way to monitor and control the flow of visitors, ensuring that only authorized individuals have access to the school premises. By requiring visitors to check in, provide identification, and obtain a visitor badge, the school can easily identify anyone on campus and quickly respond to potential security threats. Moreover, these systems create a comprehensive record of visitors, enabling the school to track and manage who enters and exits the facility. This white paper aims to give schools an overview of visitor management systems and recommendations for creating a safe and secure learning environment.

RELEVANT PASS GUIDELINES SECTION/S

District-Wide Layer

- Policies and Procedures Component ……..25

Building Perimeter Layer

- People (Roles and Training) Component ……..58
- Video Surveillance Component ……..61

MOST RELEVANT FOR:

- School administrators and safety officers.
- Public safety personnel.
- Systems integrators and consultants.

TIME TO READ

8 minutes

Introduction

Since the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, visitor management systems have become a national focus as part of an evolving school safety initiative. More schools now request a visitor's driver's license upon entering the building, and temporary name tags are becoming more commonplace in school hallways and classrooms.

Visitor Badging Systems

PASS recommends that every school should have a visitor badging system. There are many visitor management systems available on the market. Many of these systems conduct some form of ID check on visitors upon entry. The scope of the screening depends on the system and the school safety department's requirements.

While these systems can range from basic to advanced, at a minimum, visitor badges should be issued to all visiting individuals who are not staff or students. A school should sign all visitors into a log using the visitors' government-issued identification cards and checking the student information system to ensure that visitors are allowed on campus. Each visitor should be issued a badge that includes:

• School name and logo

• Text that says "VISITOR" in large, bold font

• Name of visitor

• Expiration date and time

• Color code allowing staff to easily identify the type of visitor (e.g., parents are green, vendors are blue, volunteers are yellow)

Electronic Visitor Management Systems (EVMS) are technology solutions that streamline the visitor sign-in process and track specific visitor data such as who is entering the school, when they enter, the reason for the visit, and whom they visit. Many systems record photos of the visitors or scan driver's

licenses that are presented by visitors not only to help confirm the presenter's identity but also to check for persons that should not be permitted to enter for various reasons, such as restraining orders or parental rights disputes. This usually involves checking the ID against National Sex Offender Registries but can also involve criminal background checks. Most solutions also have built-in volunteer tracking capabilities that allow school districts to track their hours, which is helpful to those that use these hours for property tax rebates and other purposes. Most systems also have built-in badging services.

ID Scanning Technology – A Key Element of VMS. Due to the limited time available to review results, identity screening is generally limited to a sex offender registry check. Some systems will check the state-level registry maintained by the state police. Others will use National Sex Offender Registries. Not surprisingly, the national search is generally a better option. While most states require a sex offender who changes residence to notify local law enforcement, as a matter of practice, that doesn't always happen. The way a system handles this screening process is important, not only in sending alerts if a visitor appears to be on the sex offender registry but also in verifying (by photo) if the visitor and sex offender are the same person, handling "false" positives, and including comments about the visitor for future handling at the campus or other campuses in the district.

In addition to a criminal database search, you should consider whether the visitor management system also screens for internally flagged issues, like "no trespass" orders or divorce decrees filed with your district to limit parental access to students.

What is the ID scanning technology? – A Key Element of VMS. At this time, there are two primary scanning methods used by the industry: 2D barcode scanning and optical character recognition (OCR). 2D barcoding offers the advantage of being less prone to misreading errors, and the photo and scanning equipment tends to be less expensive. The OCR advantage is that the reading process happens in a single step. Generally, both processes should not take more than 30 seconds. PASS recommends that visitor management systems utilize the National Sex Offender Public Website (https://www.nsopw.gov/). A prohibited person registry is a capability that your visitor management system should offer. Prohibited person registries are generally maintained by the school district and include information on issues like "no trespass" orders, domestic situations, and flagged persons. PASS recommends when implementing a visitor management system that good policies and procedures are developed. Policy and procedures should address the alert notification process when a positive hit is received.

The advantages of 2D and OCR are:

1. The 2D barcode is less prone to misreading errors than using OCR on the text.
2. Capturing a photo adds an up-to-date image of the visitor.
3. The equipment for scanning and photo capture is usually less expensive.

10 Important Points

Create a visitor policy for your district.

Just like policies for employees or volunteers, your district should have a policy regarding visitors. What will you do if a visitor refuses to cooperate in providing their identification? How will your schools deal with someone with a record? Who has the authority to decide whether a visitor will or will not be restricted from entering one or all schools?

Involve security.

Whether the security department is running your visitor management search or not, their involvement is crucial to ensure your new system works with the security systems you already have. It's also important for security to take a leadership role in defining the protocols and procedures for handling cases when a visitor shows up on the National Sex Offender Registries. If your district doesn't have a security department or director, consider reaching out to your local law enforcement for support.

Communicate with parents.

Before implementing a visitor management system, make sure your parents and community know what you're planning to do. If possible, keep them informed about how the visitor management system fits in with your other security systems and procedures so they understand and feel confident about the importance your district places on school safety.

Track everyone entering your school.

A robust visitor management system should have the flexibility to handle different types of visitors because they have different roles and rules of entry, but all need to be tracked. At a minimum, you should be able to quickly identify if a visitor is a volunteer, a business partner, a vendor, a staff member, or a student. The ability to handle all these cases in one system can save time and money.

Monitor visitors district-wide.

When a visitor enters a school, your front office staff should be able to see where they have been in the district and, if appropriate, add notes that staff can view at other campuses. It is valuable to have a one-button report of everyone on campus in case of emergencies, but it can also be beneficial to see everywhere a visitor has been throughout the school year.

Restrict access when needed.

Make sure that when someone should not be allowed on campus, you can quickly identify them through the sign-in process and apply the appropriate procedures to avoid a scene. Some parents, family members, or community members, for reasons of court orders, divorce decrees, or other legal restrictions, should not be allowed into one or more of your schools. Make sure you can add restrictions at individual campuses or district-wide, along with notes for front office staff so they know what to do.

Make sure it's easy to use.

When a visitor arrives at your school, it should be easy for front office staff to sign them in and out or for the visitor to sign themselves in and out, if appropriate. When visitors depart, they should be able to scan out or hand their printed name tag to the front office staff.

Alert your crisis team.

System alerts need to go to a specific list of contacts that should be able to vary by campus. This allows you to alert the security department, campus SROs, and administrators. A "hot button" that initiates an alert to your campus crisis team is a big plus for front office staff. That allows them to respond to a situation in the office that may not be related to visitors signing into your system.

Ensure a flexible sign-in process.

Your sign-in process should reflect your security procedures and be flexible enough to accommodate your office layout. First-time visitors should always be directed to seek assistance from the front office staff, but you should be able to let returning visitors sign in on a self-serve kiosk. If you need a current photo for your security staff, the visitor management system should have the ability to enable a webcam for that purpose.

Focus on cost effectiveness.

Hardware, such as scanners, printers, and webcams, is crucial to making a visitor management system work. To save on acquisition costs and maintenance and repair costs, see if your IT department can purchase the equipment directly from your local or online supplier. So long as the specifications match your vendor's recommendations, you will generally get faster response and the ability to centralize technical support through your in-house help desk.

Case Benefits of Visitor Management Systems

Visitor management systems have demonstrated in numerous incidents in our schools that they can be very helpful in keeping potentially dangerous individuals and situations from entering schools. For example, in August 2018, a man accompanied a woman to a Tennessee elementary school to register her child for classes. It was the first day of school for the school district, and teachers and administrators were welcoming back hundreds of students at each school. But the man didn't get very far, and he was arrested on school grounds later that morning. That's because police say he was a registered sex offender from another state, barred because of sex offender status from entering schools (https://www.kansascity.com/news/nation-world/national/article216369595.html#storylink=cpy). As a security director, I have seen visitor management systems help detect potentially dangerous people and situations as well. The systems we had detected several sex offenders attempting to enter the schools. In most cases, these were parents who had prior criminal sex offenses. When they were detected, they were found to be entering the schools only to be a part of their children's education process. However, other parents and community members were sometimes aware of these persons' sex offender statuses and would voice concerns and even make threats. Having the systems in place allowed us to check with law enforcement and the judicial system to determine if the offender was barred from being on school

grounds by the laws and conditions of their paroles or statuses. It is important to note that state and local laws vary across the country regarding how sex offenders can participate in their children's education process, so it is important for the district to research the laws and make appropriate policies and procedures based on the laws and regulations. One of our security policies was to escort any parent with this status that had been cleared by law enforcement and the judicial system. This was for their safety and the safety of others in the school community.

Visitor management systems are good not just for screening sex offenders. Information can be put into the systems for parental custody concerns and other data. For example, family legal issues in our country are quite common, especially when it comes to divorce and custody issues. Visitor management systems combined with student demographic databases can be quite useful in organizing visitations and other matters at schools. A visitor management system along with vigilant staff at an elementary school in my district thwarted a non-custodial grandparent from abducting a student. This grandparent had rope and other materials ready to restrain the student. The items were found in her car after we received the alert from the school.

Visitor management systems can also be very useful in tracking volunteer hours. For example, many senior citizens in our communities receive tax rebates for volunteering in schools. Documenting the hours they donate is very important for them when applying toward tax relief for which they may be eligible. In addition, it is important to screen volunteers for any concerns that may arise as a result of past criminal or disruptive civil activity.

Reference

Campus Safety: https://www.campussafetymagazine.com/?s=visitor+management