

# SchoolConstructionNEWS

design+construction+operations

JULY/AUGUST 2010 | VOLUME 16, NUMBER 5

 **Emlen MEDIA**  
Publisher of specialized business news since 1994



# SAFETY+ SECURITY

# Passive Security In Facility Planning

By William S. DeJong

While educational facility planners recognized the need to balance safety and security in school facilities long before the Columbine shootings and September 11, 2001, they now implement additional security measures to safeguard students and educators.



DeJong

Building security can be addressed in either an active or a passive manner: Active security is based on security systems, while passive security is based on program design, building configuration, and community participation. Schools should be based on passive concepts with applied active concepts when necessary.

Clearly, the goal is to maintain an inviting and deinstitutionalized environment, while simultaneously providing a safe haven for students, staff, and for the community, who also use the facility and adjacent support services. Indeed, the organization of a building has a major impact on student behavior and safety. If we deal with the symptoms of the problem (crime, violence, vandalism), we tend to focus on active security procedures that can be implemented. If we deal with the cause of the problem, we are likely to address most of these issues through passive security measures; i.e. program and building layout solutions.

These problems and their causes are multidimensional; therefore some issues can be addressed more easily in design than others. In addition to criminal activities, causes often include family crises, as well as a lack of a sense of belonging, identity, communication, accountability, and student/teacher relationships.

In a perfect world, the ideal school facility would be located in the heart of a compassionate community, on a large green area, and far away from dangerous traffic or railroads. The school would have only one main entrance where a friendly gatekeeper, who knew the name of every student, parent, and teacher, would welcome each individual at all times of the day.

When new schools were built in the 1960s and 1970s to accommodate children from the baby boom, educational facility planners didn't have to consider safety as much as they do today. Instead, they built eye-pleasing, sprawling one-floor facilities with multiple

entrances and windows. Now that we live in a world of political and religious unrest, there are several ways educational facility planners can address school security.

## Reduce Scale

One of the problems with big schools, especially high schools, is that students stroll several long corridors on rambling campuses to get from one class to another. The hallways are crowded with so many students that a stranger could easily go unnoticed. For these reasons, educational facility planners often recommend schools within schools, which create smaller learning communities of students and teachers who know each other well. Schools within schools also provide smaller ratios of students to teacher, resulting in individualized attention. In addition, students move within zones and do not need to crisscross the entire building to get from one class to the other.

Now when facility planners create new prototype middle schools and high schools, they cluster the classrooms and avoid corridors. When classrooms are clustered around a common area, like the cafeteria, there is constant student flow, which contributes to overall safety. Instead of a large locker bay, lockers are decentralized throughout the building and located in greater proximity to classrooms. A 500-student building can feel like a 1,500-student building and a 1,500-student building can feel like a

500-student building based on how lockers are arranged.

## Distribute Leadership

Instead of placing the administrative offices by the school's main entrance, facility planners often disperse the offices. For example, they may put the principal's office at the main entrance, resulting in one gatekeeper, and place offices for the assistant principal and guidance counselors (additional gatekeepers) throughout the building. However, if facility planners really want to impact security and increase supervision, they create clusters of four to eight classrooms and place teacher planning areas and administrative offices adjacent to the clusters. They also place student lockers and restrooms close to the clusters.

## Use Glass

A critical element of security is the ability to observe visually; therefore, glass can be very useful. It's obvious that students should not be in unsupervised spaces for long, and if most spaces in a school are enclosed, this has a profound impact on staffing levels. For example, students may need access to a computer lab during the school day or after hours. This is not advisable if there is no adult in the computer lab; however, if the computer lab has glass walls, students can be supervised from adjacent areas, even the hallways.

The same can be said for windows

in administrative offices. They provide visual connections to the hallways, front doors, etc. While it is not possible to use glass everywhere, it can provide passive supervision and also create an improved aesthetic feel.

## Community Involvement

It is natural to think of ways to keep potentially harmful adults out of schools, but first school administrators, planners, and architects should consider security measures that also make the building more accessible to the community.

Parental and community involvement can be part of the security solution. More community involvement means more student/adult relationships at school resulting in improved student behavior. Parental involvement is equally as important. Passive security results naturally through strong relationships among students, parents, teachers, and the community. The more a school facility is "emotionally owned" by the individuals it serves, the better.

Ensuring security doesn't mean creating a prison-like environment. A holistic approach is needed, along with a lot of common sense.

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