



School Access Control

Every school district faces unique challenges, but they all share a basic responsibility for ensuring the safety and security of the students, the faculty and the staff. To meet this responsibility, many schools systems are including access control within their overall security strategy.

The balance that must be struck in incorporating access control, as it is in all security issues, is maintaining a an open user-friendly environment while establishing a safe and secure facility at all times; including when school is in session, when limited faculty and staff are present, and when the school facilities are unoccupied.

As a component of a complete security solution, access control not only manages physical access to facilities and assets, but creates an audit trail that is valuable for both operational and forensic purposes. Access control often represent the center of an overall security management implementation since the event database that integrates all security-related actions is most typically controlled by the access control system.

The primary reasons for using access control in schools are:

1. Protection of administrative areas and other sensitive areas;
2. Visitor management;
3. Protection of high value assets;
4. Emergency response;
5. Maintenance of records of facility use; and
6. Management of operational costs.

Let's look at each of these reasons for using access control:

Protection of administrative areas and other sensitive areas

Access control systems are used in schools to protect administrative offices and rooms where personnel files and student records are maintained. The policies for access to these areas will typically be substantially different when schools are in session than during periods when administrative staff is not present.

Visitor Management

Visitor management is a responsibility of all schools today. Visitors will include educational professionals, parents, substitutes as well as support and service personnel. The policies for each of these groups will typically be significantly different.

Effective access control requires limitations to the access points to the school, but will permit schools to control physical access [if necessary] as well as to maintain records for all of these visitors.

Visitor management may include badging and temporary access to sensitive areas for visitors as required.

Protection of high value assets

In many schools, computer and science labs have significant high-value assets that that can be subject to theft. For this function, access control is typically integrated with intrusion detection and security video. In this manner, access control can provide verified alarms for police response as well as forensic records.

In some schools the access control system may also integrate video surveillance at external areas where there is a history of graffiti or other vandalism. Some schools are using two way audio to warn students that their actions are being recorded and they will be subject to disciplinary action.

In general, the school can use the access control system to reduce theft, ensure privacy and reduce damage to school property.

Emergency response

Access control systems can be used to facilitate automatic lockdown ands communicate with teachers that are affected to inform them of the event and, most importantly, to communicate with the teacher that the lock-down has ended. Each action is important. When there is an event, it is imperative to communicate the need for a lock down as quickly as possible. It is also important to ensure that classes are not caught in that lockdown after the alarm has passed.

Newer access control systems also provide the capability to communicate with local police. Many school lock downs are driven by an alert from the police that there is a problem in the neighborhood of the school and that there is a possible danger to students if they are allowed to leave the classroom

While remote locking to all classrooms is expensive, it is important if the school wants to institute automatic, remote lockdown. Even during lockdown, all school doors need to be able to be opened from the inside (so that students and staff can exit in the event of a fire or other emergency), but the school should be able to reduce the number of doors that can be opened from the outside.

The access control system should also be able to facilitate mustering for situational awareness of students and staff during and after lock down events

Maintenance of records of facility use

One of the benefits of access control is in risk management. A robust security, safety and emergency management program can reduce insurance costs. Many schools are members of cooperative insurance programs and these insurance alliances and associations are focused on minimizing the liability exposure of the schools in the alliance.

Gymnasiums, athletic fields and libraries represent areas with significant potential for liability risk. They typically are made available to community organizations for after-school use. Security in these facilities can be enhanced and liability can be reduced by controlling the access points to the facilities and capturing video surveillance of the activities within these areas.

In middle and high schools, another area of risk management is in the laboratory areas, either where chemicals are stored or where physics experiments are being conducted. These areas are often subject to liability and compliance requirements, for example the policies and procedure requirements relating to the control, storage and disposal of chemicals.

Recently, some middle and high schools have added remote duress and panic alarms to their access control systems. Teachers can transmit as many as four different commands-from "I am uncomfortable with the situation" to "I need help, quick". This ability for a teacher to communicate quickly and remotely can prevent many high liability events from occurring.

Management of operating costs

A new use of access control is reduction of operating costs. Once the infrastructure for access control is implemented, many schools have added robust wireless sensors to quickly recognize and eliminate operational problems.

One example is the use of wireless sensors to ensure that fire extinguishers are where they should be, and that they are fully pressurized and not blocked. The schools have eliminated the costs of monitoring the extinguishers manually.

Another example is the use of temperature sensors to ensure that food is properly refrigerated and being stored at a temperature that complies with normal safety standards. This eliminates spoilage and liability

A third example is to use water (humidity) sensors to monitor bathroom areas that have a history of vandalism and water damage.

Another example is to connect the access control system to field lights to ensure that they are turned off after events and thereby reduce the power costs.

For schools with their own police force or with a designated response team, reports can be downloaded into the system and stored for subsequent analysis. When schools have their own police force or guards, a Guard Tour module can be added to the access control system to ensure the operational efficiency of the security staff.

Recently, some access control systems have developed analog to digital interfaces with a wireless reporting capability. These sensors can monitor all utilities and allow for more cost effective use of those resources.

Conclusions

Access control systems represent a significant element for school safety and security. Together with other components such as video, environmental sensors and management of security-related events in a searchable database, they permit school districts to meet their safety and security responsibilities to their students, to their faculty, to their staff and to the community at large. They also can be used to reduce both liability and operational expenses. More schools are seeing the benefit of these systems and are using access control as an integrating platform for their security, safety and emergency management initiatives.