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Electronic access control for modern-day school security



Shopping for security? Here are some key points to think about

Today's security systems can be customized almost to infinity, and can include as many bells and whistles as you care to ask and pay for. Certainly, you'll want a certain degree of sophistication and customization to meet your needs as closely as possible. But you'll save money, and the time which equates to money, by sticking relatively close to the norm for your type of school: size, grades served, and location.

Location refers not only to city, suburb, town or rural, but also the specific surroundings of the actual building or buildings – crowded area, plenty of elbow room or relatively remote. Your needs will, of course, depend to some extent on other security arrangements which may already be in place.

Competent access control is the prime mover of school safety. From kindergarten to the largest college campus, prevention and deterrence are the keys to protecting our most valuable asset, our children and young people.

Access control was only once a big-city concern, but today many suburbs and rural areas are as interested or even more interested in access control than city schools. Even areas with few foreseeable problems are taking the initiative ahead of time.

No one wants to be responsible for locking the barn door only after the horse has already left. The electronic access control system provides the structure and security to deter problems. The school takes action to make it as secure as possible. The system's report capabilities let the authorities know whether the doors are locked or open, and control who can enter your building.

At the same time, the system protects the assets inside: computer labs, IT rooms, theft of identity, even items from the staff locker room. All this can be incorporated into an electronic access system, which also provides a complete audit trail of who entered and when.

Protecting the primary grades

Obviously, primary schools have different management situations from high school and college. The helpful aspect is that children in the primary grades do, to some extent, expect to be managed. That makes it especially important that unauthorized adults do not come in contact with them.

This begins, of course, with controlling the entrances and exits to buildings. The buildings only need to be open at certain times, and all occupied school building should be secured within a few minutes after the bell rings! All doors should be secured, and latecomers and visitors notified to apply for admission at the properly overseen door nearest the office, where they will be taken to sign in via the electronic system.

Visitor management through electronics

Management becomes more complex in a larger school district, but any size school has visitors to manage, especially when children need to be picked up.

A "paper trail" has always been an insecure way of registering and managing visitors who are admitted. It is much easier to control visitors with an electronic system. The visitor's photo can be captured along with a signature if a child is to be signed in or out.

In preschool and K-4, relatives often come in to pick up children. Through the electronic system, school authorities can match the live image of the applying adult to the authorized stored image and a picture of the child. City schools and daycare centers frequently use this method to verify who has authority to pick the kids up.

The system can also store messages where, for example, there's a grievance in the family and only certain people are authorized to pick up a child. Some systems make these precautions mandatory, some offer them to parents as an option.

The electronic system can include a "watch list" of local undesirables supplied by the police department.

Saving on re-keying

Not only visitors, but also faculty and staff need to gain admission. Schools that have not yet gone the electronic route very often have no idea, and no true control over, how many keys are out. The electronic system saves greatly by removing the necessity and cost of re-keying.

"Access control at any school or university must never be compromised. Aware of the recent tragedies at campuses around the world, school environments must be protected 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

Case Study

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When partnering with a supplier or selecting among suppliers, these are some key questions to ask:

How long have you been in business?

A number of companies just joined the bandwagon after 9/11, and many manufacturers have been in and out of the business in the past ten years. You want to partner with a company that has longevity in this industry and the experience that goes with it. Ask to see their track record; check to see that schools of your type are on it!

Are you UL certified?

UL protects the user, and is some assurance that the technology you're being offered is up to date and continuing forward.

Are the systems you sell now backward-compatible with the systems you sold in the past, and will this continue to be so?

It's important that your system doesn't become obsolete in the future.

Why is the system you're suggesting to meet my needs so much cheaper than others being offered?

We all like to save a few dollars, but a major difference in price can be a real "Buyer beware!"

Events control

For special events, the electronic access control system can be set to control where people can enter. Then it can automatically relock the doors at the end of the predetermined time, and record that the doors are locked.

Programming covers many eventualities. For example, during school breaks the system can be programmed to deny access to anybody who is not authorized to be in the building. It can be set up at the beginning of the school year to include holiday periods, days off and weekends, so only the cards of designated administrators are operable at those times. Times, days, weeks and months can be restricted or varied for each session or in mid-session should the need arise.

Of course the system is tied into possible forced intrusions. It can alarm and notify school authorities and police; emails can automatically be sent to any desired list.

CCTV tie-in

Today's electronics offer the capability of tying CCTV cameras to the security system. This becomes a very important extra deterrent. The projected intrusion comes up on the event screen of the access control system, and can be automatically forwarded to a PBA, an email, and the police.

Photo ID

The electronic system can and should include photo ID capability. ID cards for even a small staff are a very sensible precaution. They can also provide a sense of security to the smaller children, who are taught that the ID shows that the adult wearing it is in authority and reliable.

Badging in high school and college

In middle school, high school and college, photo ID badging expands to be a useful tool for students. They use their badges in the library, cafeteria, perhaps the locker room. Some enterprising school systems have extended it to acceptance by local food shops and other merchants in town. This ID for students often includes an incentive bonus for the school.

Won't the kids lose their badges? Of course they will, but the lost badge can be cancelled in the system the moment it's reported. Replacement can be free or, especially for repetitive offenders, cost a few dollars. Live with image comparison along with stored signatures ensures that the new badge is being issued to the right person.

What about the budget?

Even for a win-win proposition like access control, there are still budgets to be considered. In a K-12 public sector the access control appropriation traditionally goes through the school board, then through the appropriations cycle, then out for bid with specifications.

Today, however, grant money may be available, through the Department of Homeland Security or through the state. An experienced access control integrator can work with the board or administrator to help find this money.

Savings in other areas are also available with access control. There is return on investment by reducing pilfering and downright theft: missing property, lunchroom equipment, audiovisual aids. There are savings in not having to rekey if a master key turns out to be missing; and major savings in reducing the opportunity for vandalism.

Access control in college

As many parents and the teenagers themselves have discovered, college is a very different place from high school. A university setting usually includes a large campus environment with many detached buildings, and the challenge is to retain the welcoming openness of the campus but also keep it secure.

Some campus environments include housing. Others do not, but still need to be restricted because of equipment, technology, and all the possibilities of an accident or even a violent intrusive incident. The access control system has the benefit of emergency lockdown: all doors can be locked or unlocked in an emergency. The system can be used to immediately notify security personnel and police and send out emergency evacuation notices.

The usual solution is to keep the campus grounds accessible, but have gated parking areas and restrict the buildings to the students and staff. This is done by providing an access control reader at the entrances to buildings and dorms. Access control is conveniently tied into the one-card system



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About the author

Michael J. Mahon is a regional manager for Sielox, Runnemede, NJ. He represents the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions from Maine to Virginia, including Ohio and Michigan. He lives in New Jersey.

In the security industry for twenty-two years, Mahon has extensive experience in security in schools from primary through college. He is a member of ASIS, a participant of NACAS and NACU in the education area, has served as an instructor for the Institutional Locksmiths of America and has presented seminars on educational security. He has completed credits at George Washington University in access control and CCTV optimization.

About Sielox

Sielox is a leader in electronic access control security solutions. It offers a deep product line, proved product technology and years of experience. The company continues to offer backward-compatible technology, vigorously supporting its legacy products.

The Sielox flagship offering, its enterprise-capable Pinnacle™ access control software solution, provides total control of the entire access control network, plus the ability to upgrade or reconfigure controllers, readers, proximity cards and other hardware. It incorporates agile methodology for future software development.

in use at most colleges. The access control card is also used for ID, debit/credit, meal plan, library, entrance to the dorm and more.

Prevention

Very high levels of access control/security technology are available if desired. School authorities, budgeting committees and even the taxpayers are realizing the importance of prevention over response, and taking steps to put the necessary capabilities in place. In the future we will find more and more instances where locks and keys are being replaced with the safety and security of access control biometrics. In school and many other areas, security will become a habit.

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open | modular | scalable | intuitive