

Top 6 Security Mistakes

1. Chasing the last high-profile emergency

Unlike other organizations, school districts experience intensified pressure to prepare for emergencies. The responsibility of protecting children can weigh heavily on school boards, administrators, and staff. Schools are inundated with conflicting opinions on what makes safer environments, and the emotions surrounding safety are amplified in the wake of a tragedy. Schools often find themselves in a position of “chasing” the previous emergency. Purchases, staffing, plans, and trainings implemented in the aftermath of a significant incident are often based on perceptions of what would have prevented or reduced the impact of that emergency. This leads to poor decisions based on emotion without consideration for risk assessment.

Security and safety dollars are often competing with other financial obligations. Making decisions based on fear can lead to wasted resources with unintended consequences. Chasing the most recent high-profile incident seldom produces the desired reduction in incidents. This occurs when schools prioritize response over prevention. Decision-making bodies overestimate the value of physical security in comparison to preventative strategies. This miscalculation persists because preventative strategies, such as in-depth assessments and behavioral threat assessment programs, are intangibles.

2. Failure to understand the threats

Another mistake is failure to understand the source and nature of the threats. The factors that influence threats are varied and include age of students, physical location, size of staff, proximity to high-risk areas, etc. It is imperative to determine what threats are possible and focus any preventative efforts on those areas. Districts should invest resources into assessing threats by utilizing the following process:

- a. Determine the full scope of all potential risks.
- b. Determine the probability or frequency of each risk.
- c. Evaluate the impact each risk could have on the organization.
- d. Project realistic timelines for purchase, installation, training, and full implementation based on the severity of the identified threat.

3. Failure to identify gaps and weaknesses

Every organization has gaps or weaknesses in security and safety plans. The goal should be to minimize those gaps and weaknesses. When doing this, it is critical to ensure the culture of the school community is not compromised. Parents want their children to

attend a school that is open and inviting, not one that leaves them feeling like they are entering a prison. It is important to acknowledge that some risk factors can only be reduced and not fully eliminated. Districts should consider weighing the risks identified in an assessment against the following criteria when creating a plan to address them:

- a. Operational Necessity
 - Weigh each safety and security risk against its impact to your standard daily operations.
 - Consider how the desired changes would impact the needs and experience of your students, families, and community.
- b. Culture
 - Evaluate the desired changes against any impact to culture, both short- and long-term impact.
 - Remember “convenience” for staff and visitors is not as high of a priority as safety for all.
 - Seek the input of stakeholders such as staff, parents, and students.
- c. Budget
 - Delineate budgetary restrictions according to staffing, equipment, installation, training, and implementation.
 - Prioritize the measures needed to protect human life over the pressure to make other educational purchases.
 - Determine how long-term sustainability will impact purchasing decisions.
- d. Resources
 - Determine if the district has the expertise to fix these issues or whether outsourcing is needed.

4. Focusing solely on physical security

Safety and security is a layered process. When an incident receiving national attention occurs in a school, previously non-existent layers are implemented in reaction to the incident. These layers may include physical security, planning, training, supplies, and recovery efforts. One recurring issue revealed across many school security assessments is that districts commonly allocate significant resources addressing only physical security. This includes the purchase and installation of security items, such as cameras, which do not prevent nor assist in responding to a threat. For example, security cameras provide the *greatest* value when they are monitored in real time. Security cameras that are *not* monitored, and are used only for video evidentiary purposes, provide minimal impact on security. It is recommended that schools ensure they have created multiple layers in safety and security programs, as opposed to relying on a singular focus. The following guidelines will help determine which physical security elements have the greatest impact:

- a. Determine if threats are internal, external, or a mixture of each. External security features have little impact on internal threats.
- b. Make selections based on the greatest impact to safety. For example, cameras may not be as impactful as an alert system.
- c. Develop a process for any physical security. If you have a secure entrance vestibule, have a process for its use.

5. Incomplete planning: the “one size fits all” approach

The drafting and training of emergency procedures requires extensive experience and expertise. Many districts do not have this expertise in house, so they utilize internal resources that are ill equipped to take on this task. Emergency plans should be written by experienced security experts and should be customized to the location for which they are written. Emergencies and critical incidents are rapidly evolving situations. Keep plans concept based as opposed to a series of hard to follow steps. Consider using primary protocols as the basis for your plan and referring to those within each individual emergency. The following information should be included as custom elements in emergency plans:

- a. Command and Control – Determine who is in control and how communication will be accomplished.
- b. Reunification Sites – Select specific locations in proximity to individual buildings for gathering following an evacuation.
- c. Notifications and Alerts – Determine how alerting staff, students, and families will be accomplished.

6. Failure to train

The Navy Seals have an expression: “In moments of stress, human beings don’t rise to the occasion but instead sink to the level of their training.” The biggest mistake schools make is failing to provide regular opportunities for training on emergency response. In an emergency, most individuals will not take the time to find the emergency plan and read it. They will either respond with hardwired responses, (Fight, Flight, Freeze) or they will respond to the extent they have been trained. School administrators should consider responsible and reasonable multi-hazard training. While active shooter training has been prioritized in recent years, it is more beneficial to train staff on concepts that apply to a variety of emergencies in addition to active shooter response. Be cautious of designating all training time to a singular type of emergency. Training should incorporate best practice, be engaging, and conducted on a recurring and frequent basis. Training is perishable, meaning if staff trains on something only once and never revisits those

concepts, individuals will largely forget them. We recommend the following regarding training:

- a. Training should be multi-hazard, not limited to only active shooter response. It should include primary response protocols, the physiology of response and reaction, and decision-making processes.
- b. Training should be given to all school personnel, not just certified or administrative staff. Online training options make training more accessible to accommodate support staff schedules.
- c. Training should be customized to a campus and its procedures. Training should always be aligned with the outcome of an assessment. A security consultant who does not know a building's operations or facilities lacks insight needed to advise personnel how to respond to an emergency in that environment.
- d. Training is perishable and should be conducted, refreshed, and revisited routinely.

Districts should focus on comprehensive and holistic planning and training with a stronger focus on proven preventative strategies. This will make Michigan schools and students safer and more secure.