

Strengthening Security in the Smaller School District

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East Granby, CT implements plan in phases to improve access control and increase security.

To improve its security, the East Granby, CT school district is implementing its security plan in phases that consider priorities as well as budget and personnel limitations. Securing perimeter doors and controlling access are the first steps to putting the plan in place.

East Granby Public Schools, located near the Hartford airport, is the smallest K-12 district in the state of Connecticut, with just three schools. They include Allgrove School K-3), Seymour School (Grades 4 & 5), and the East Granby Middle/High School (Grades 6-12). Together, they serve more than 800 students, in an area with a population of approximately 5,000.

East Granby's School Safety Initiatives began in the 1998-1999 school year when, in response to a request by the governor, officials of the town formed a town-wide safety committee. Included were representatives of the boards of Selectmen and Education and of parent-teacher organizations, public safety officials, as well as the town's youth safety coordinator, building official, fire marshal and other interested parties. The committee met three times between June and September and also walked the town's three school buildings to become familiar with the facilities.

As a result of the positive dialogue that was established between the town's agencies, the group was able to review existing needs and consider recommendations by a Board of Education safety consultant for various improvements in facilities and practices that would provide greater safety and security. The recommendations were then incorporated into the mission of a newly-formed Board of Education Safety and Security Committee, charged with their ongoing implementation. As an added benefit of the committee's activities, public awareness of safety and security issues has been raised.

David J. McNally, Assistant Principal at Allgrove and Seymour Schools, also has played a key role in implementing the program throughout the school system. He explains, "The consultant found deficiencies in the physical plant environment at the three schools with respect to communications, alarm and hardware applications, as well as unchallenged access by the general public. He gave us a report with recommendations on what had to happen at all the schools to achieve and maintain an appropriate and balanced sense of security."

Key areas covered by the report included the need for a comprehensive Safe Schools program to address physical requirements and protocols for response to hostage, hostile, suspicious intruder or weapons events; signage and welcome centers to handle visitors; in-service training for security and safety; enhanced communication throughout the schools, including classroom telephones and public address systems; establishment of a comprehensive crisis response protocol covering immediate and secondary actions by teachers, staff, school office, principals and others.

Door Security a Priority

McNally says, "One of the most important things in the report was to upgrade and secure all the doors, so that's where we started. We allocated a non-recurring capital improvement

budget of about \$65,000 to upgrade door security at the elementary schools.” Among the consultant’s recommendations were standardizing of door hardware products, upgrading inferior or defective hardware, and increased use of electronic access controls.

In some ways, timing of the initiative couldn’t have been better. McNally says, “We were just ready to do a \$9 million renovation at the high school, and I was able to incorporate electronic locks into the specs so they would be consistent throughout the district.”

The district selected Schlage® electronic locks, which use a credential that incorporates an iButton on a key fob so it can be carried on the user’s key ring. This eliminates the possibility of loss or damage that can occur when card credentials are carried in pocket or purse. Making changes to when and where each credential can be used is fast and easy, using a laptop computer. The updated information then can be downloaded to each applicable lock in seconds, much more quickly than re-keying and more secure than conventional keys. In addition, access to each building and each area within it can be customized to suit specific needs, for example allowing a teacher to enter only his or her room plus the library and computer room.

The system will enable the superintendent and other key personnel to enter all three schools using only one key, without the security dangers inherent in master keying. If lost, the electronic keys cannot be duplicated, and they can be eliminated from the system quickly and easily. McNally tells of a recent situation where an employee had to be dismissed and denied further access without sacrificing confidentiality. “I had it taken care of in less than a half-hour by going to the locations with the laptop and invalidating that key. We were able to keep it in-house, and nobody else knew anything about it, because people see me downloading audit trails with the laptop all the time. If we would have had to bring in a locksmith, it would have taken longer, and people would have been asking questions.” In sensitive situations, or when keys

are simply lost, there is no need to re-key locks. Since the key is easy to remove from the database of valid credentials, whether it is returned is unimportant.

The standalone lock's retention of access attempts offers an audit trail and is a highly useful security tool. When a user opens or attempts to open a door with the key fob, the data from that credential is captured for later downloading to a laptop computer. This information can then be reviewed to determine who was in a given area at any time, as well as identifying attempts by unauthorized individuals who may have found a lost key fob or be trying to access areas they are not authorized to enter.

One of the report's major recommendations was to control and secure entry to the buildings by directing visitors to the main entrance and locking all other entries. The main doors are unlocked only during the time students are arriving. Mc Nally says, "Fifteen minutes after the students get here, I just touch the key to the lock to secure the doors, and visitors have to ring a doorbell to get in. The custodian does the same thing at the other elementary school." He notes that this is easily done and provides more flexibility than a hard-wired system that would lock or unlock the doors automatically. "There are too many snow days, parent-teacher days, late days and other variables." He points out that the locks incorporate two touch receptors, one for momentary release and the other for maintained status. "You just touch the maintained port once to unlock the door when the kids are coming in, then touch it again to lock it afterward. When the door is locked, the teachers use the momentary port to gain access without leaving the door unlocked."

Hard-wired electronic locks generally are installed on high-use exterior doors where panic devices are used for egress. "The hard-wired locks, while individual units, are part of the standalone system rather than being networked," McNally points out. "At the front doors,

electric-latch panic devices are wired to a power supply and controller, so they can also be unlocked from the office by a pushbutton after a visitor's identification is verified." He notes that one exterior entry uses a standalone unit on a storeroom entrance that does not require an exit device.

Inside the Allgrove and Middle/High School buildings, standalone versions of the same locks are used to secure classroom and office doors. The electronic locks incorporate an inside iButton reader so the teacher can lock the classroom door's exterior lever from the inside, without having to open the door. This was part of the consultant's recommendations to protect against hostile intruder situations. However, the door can still be opened from the inside as required by life safety codes.

The standalone locks are basically self-contained "smart locks" that combine the functions of traditional door-mounted mechanical hardware with electronic components. They are linked together by a software program that makes them easy to manage as a system by centralizing the management of all data files and operational parameters. It also retains a log of people traveling into and through the facility, which provides audit trails and other information for security management.

At Seymour School, which has an open classroom layout, the office doors are the only interior doors to be secured. Recess doors at the rear of the building have maintain switches, so the teacher can touch the key to unlock the doors when the students leave, then touch it again to relock the door after recess.

The system can secure the facility and still make it available to the community, which allows McNally to give electronic keys to those who need to use the gym at Allgrove or Seymour School on weekends or after hours. Because the gym is in an area that can be locked

off from the rest of the building, he can issue a key that will allow access only through a door leading to that area. “ People generally take the key for the weekend and give it back to me afterward, but I don’t worry if they lose them because I’m able to give them keys that are only good for a certain period of time,” he says.

Among the other benefits of the system, McNally says, is that he will be able to put a single electronic key in the fire department lock box outside each school that will grant fire fighters access to all areas of the building. He expects to have electronic locking completed throughout the entire school district by July 1, 2002.

Throughout the process of specifying and integrating the electronic locks and related door hardware into the buildings, McNally worked closely with James Fellows, of Raybern Company, the local IR distributor based in Rocky Hill, CT, and Donald H. Thompson, of IOR Security & Safety Consultants, Needham Heights, MA.

Further Steps Continue Security Improvements

While access control was the most pressing issue, other aspects of safety and security are also being addressed. Although CCTV has not been widely used here, it answers a special need at Allgrove School, where the main entrance cannot be seen from the office. Instead of relocating the office, which would have required major building changes, the CCTV is paired with an innercom that allows office staff to monitor visitors and confirm their identity. A pushbutton in the office retracts the latch of a Von Duprin EL 99 series exit device and allows them to enter.

At Seymour School, where the office is located across a hallway from the main entrance, security was improved by simply avoiding the placement of student artwork on the adjacent windows so office staff members could see visitors better before letting them in.

Other related issues that already have been addressed as part of the overall plan include replacing narrow pairs of doors separated by a mullion with a single, wider opening to meet ADA requirements.

Plans Continue to Develop

While the consultant's report has served as a working interim plan to implement critical issues such as access control, the school district's Director of Curriculum is putting together a district-wide crisis response plan based on the initial report. McNally says that similar crisis plans of other districts are being reviewed, and the best approaches from these plans will be incorporated into East Granby's plan. However, the final plan will be tailored to meet the district's specific needs.

In summary, McNally reports that, despite some initial concern that there could be some resistance in a small town where people know each other, support from residents of the community has been positive. "They feel better for their children's safety," he concludes.

CAPTION INFORMATION:

1 & 2. Classroom door lock at Allgrove elementary school is typical of standalone units used throughout the building. Electronic key fob is simply touched to port above lever to unlock. Conventional lock cylinder below is for override.

3 & 3A. Because the main entrance is not visible from the office at Allgrove School, it is monitored by CCTV, above and to left of door, with intercom (below sign). Schlage electronic lock (on door frame) provides controlled access for teachers and staff during school hours when door is normally locked.

4. Addition to East Granby High School will include moving office so main entrance can be seen easily, as well as a gymnasium that can be locked off from the rest of the school for after-hours and weekend use. Electronic locks will allow access only to gym area and can be programmed

to operate only during specified times. Electronic key credentials can be invalidated quickly if lost or to avoid misuse.

5. Dual-port electronic locks are used on some doors to allow a teacher to lock the door's exterior lever without leaving the classroom, in case of a hostage or other lockdown situation..

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