

The Value of Architect Participation in the School Safety and Security Audit

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In the wake of the numerous tragic incidents of violence in schools across the nation over the past two years, the need to reassess not only school security procedures, but also design features of educational facilities has become increasingly apparent. It is impossible, through design and engineering alone, to eliminate all threats to the safety of students and staff in school buildings. However, safety and security considerations must be integrated into the design of new facilities and the renovation of existing facilities to the greatest extent possible, if schools are to operate daily with an acceptable level of risk.

It is essential to recognize that school design cannot ignore the manner in which students typically circulate about the campus or how and where they gather. The places where students store their belongings, where and how they enter and leave buildings and school grounds, children with special needs classrooms, where they park their cars, and where they board school busses are additional considerations that have important design implications.

How can school districts determine what design features maximally contribute to school safety and security? Simply by taking an outside in look at the manner in which schools operate. A comprehensive School Safety and Security Audit is an excellent means by which administrators and architects can assess the safety and security design strengths and vulnerabilities of any educational facility. Architects can gain a first hand appreciation for the challenging and often chilling realities with which administrators and teachers regularly contend by participating in School Safety and Security Audits. Nothing provides an architect with valuable design insights in the same manner in which participation in a School Safety and Security Audit does. He can learn a great deal by striving to see school facilities as students see them. He will quickly observe, on any campus assessed, there are certain students, who regularly expose and take advantage of design flaws in school buildings to “act out,” thereby threatening the safety and security of fellow students and staff.

Participation in the School Safety and Security Audit will also quickly cause a professional architect to recognize that the “school day” typically begins at 5:30 AM, when custodial personnel begin to unlock gates, check mechanical systems, conduct a vandalism sweep, and open buildings, readying for the students’ and staff arrival. He will also come to realize that the day does not typically conclude until approximately 11:00 PM, when alarms are set, doors are locked, security lighting is turned on, and the campus is secured at the perimeter. He will come to appreciate the need to consider school safety and security twenty fours/day, seven days/week in architectural design.

From the time students are dismissed in the afternoon, until well into the evening, demands are made on a wide variety school facilities to support an extensive array of student programs and activities. Band and chorus rooms, the stage and auditorium, the gymnasium, locker rooms, athletic fields, the media center, computer labs, multi-purpose rooms, and the school cafeteria all receive intense utilization throughout the school year. The challenge confronting school architects is to design buildings in such a fashion that, simultaneously, students and the public can utilize facilities with a high level of safety and custodial personal can clean, maintain, and secure unutilized parts of the campus.

The National Institute for School and Workplace Safety recommends:

- (1) School Safety and Security Audits* be conducted annually on the campus of every school in America, and
- (2) School design architects participate with safety and security experts, administrators, and other appropriate persons in the conduct of such audits.

The participation of architects in School Safety and Security Audits would be analogous to the practice used in many communities, which allows judges, attorneys, and community leaders to participate in a “ride along program” with law enforcement officers while they engage in community patrol. Similarly, architects’ participation in the scrutiny of any school’s operation would provide a “bird’s eye view of life in the trenches,” a reality check, and understandings and insights of inestimable worth that could translate into

improved designs for school facilities. It is clear that designs for school facilities for the Twenty-first Century must be curriculum driven and safety and security conscious.

* Attachment – The Anatomy of a School Safety and Security Audit