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Security & Continuity



SECURING OUR SCHOOLS

the difference between feeling and being secure

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Factor Security & Continuity
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**WOULD WE
RATHER FEEL
OUR CHILDREN
ARE SAFE IN
SCHOOL, OR
MAKE THEM
SAFE?**

As the United States struggles to cope with the recent wave of school violence, school administrators face a critical choice. They can either implement strategies to improve the perception of school security or actually improve school security. In other words, they can attempt to feel safe or be safe.

Experts agree effective education requires students and teachers to feel safe.¹ The non-profit Education Council in Columbus, Ohio states, “[s]tudents cannot learn when they do not feel safe.”² Therefore, the violence that recently rocked many schools in historically low crime areas threatens to undermine the efficacy of education at all levels across the country.

At the end of September 2006, a Colorado gunman took six schoolgirls hostage. He killed one girl after sexually assaulting them all. Two days later, a 15-year-old Wisconsin student shot and killed his high school principal. Another tragedy struck a few days later when a 32-year old interloper killed five girls in an Amish schoolhouse in rural Pennsylvania. Within weeks of these attacks, dozens of incidents occurred across the country where officials closed or locked down schools in response to violence or potential violence. Painful memories of Columbine, Jonesboro and other school tragedies in recent years reinforce the national concern over what many experts believe to be an “epidemic of school violence”³ threatening the safety of public and private education facilities at all levels.

Adding to the concern, the ever-present threat of terrorists targeting a school also looms large on our horizon. The Beslan school hostage crisis demonstrated some terrorist groups are willing to cross all lines of human decency to achieve their aims⁴. This crisis began on September 1, 2004 when approximately 35 Islamic Chechnyan terrorists took more than 1,200 school children and adults hostage at a school in the Russian town of Beslan in North Ossetia. When the 62-hour siege ended, 359 hostages and security force members were dead and 719 were wounded. These figures include 186 dead children, but not the thirty-plus dead terrorists.⁵ The Beslan school tragedy left an indelible mark on the entire Russian nation.

While the thought of something like the Beslan school attack occurring in the US is difficult to confront, administrators must recognize the evidence that it is possible. The “Manchester Document,” an al-Qaeda training manual discovered in February 2000, instructs operatives to gather targeting intelligence on “important personalities, and all matters related to those (residence, work place, times of leaving and returning, wives and

1 Srianthi Perera, “Pupils Must Feel ‘Safe to Learn’”, Arizona Central Mar 21, 2005, <http://www.azcentral.com/community/ahwatukee/articles/0321principal21Z6.html>

2 Edcouncil.org, Main Page, October 23, 2006

3 Mason, Julie. “Prevent School Violence, Bush Tells Conference” Houston Chronicle 10 Oct 2006: A1

4 “Putin meets angry Beslan mothers”, BBC News, 2 Sep 2005.

5 “120 funerals in one day for Russian town”, CBC News, 6 Sep 2004

children, places visited).”⁶ The mention of children in this document and the terrorist attack on the school in Beslan require education and government decision makers to take this possibility seriously. Federal intelligence analysts familiar with al-Qaeda tactics and Muhammad Atta’s September 11th letter recognize the following:

“IN THE FACE OF THESE THREATS, SCHOOLS MUST ACTUALLY IMPROVE THEIR SECURITY INSTEAD OF MERELY FOCUSING ON THE PERCEPTION.”

- 1) al-Qaeda (and branches thereof) take a great deal of time to plan an operation;
- 2) they value targets which will maximize the psychological impact on the civilian and military population; and,
- 3) their long-term goal is to extract a huge financial and human cost from the US for its continued presence in the middle east and its support of Israel.

Threats to school security come in diverse forms. Gangs, disturbed youths, local criminals, chaos following a major natural or social disaster, terrorism, and many other forces threaten the security of US schools. In the face of these threats, schools must actually improve their security instead of merely focusing on the perception of security.

President Bush held a summit in October 2006 to address improving school security. While the summit yielded a great deal of discussion on problems with school security, it failed to produce broad consensus on specific solutions. The experts did agree, however, schools must better protect their students, faculties, and facilities.

“A COOKIE-CUTTER APPROACH TO SCHOOL SECURITY SOLUTIONS FAILS”

The national summit did not arrive at consensus on school security strategies primarily because effective strategies vary greatly depending on individual schools and their communities. While all schools, irrespective of their particular issues, face some similar threats, their overall risks are inherently different. Factors altering risk include geography, level (pre-K, primary, middle, secondary, and higher education all face unique issues), sector (public or private), size, culture, and demographics. These differences not only play a large part in assessing the threats a school faces, they greatly affect identifying the most appropriate risk mitigation strategies. In short, a cookie-cutter approach to school security solutions fails to address the specific needs of specific schools.

While threats and risks differ from school to school, all schools should adopt a solid, process-based methodology to identify and assess their risks. The Department of Justice (DOJ) recommended schools take a process-based approach to evaluating their risks over seven years ago while lamenting the fact few schools do.⁷ The DOJ stated, “In the past, schools have rarely understood the need or had the time or resources to

⁶ Department of Justice, Military Studies in the Jihad Against the Tyrants, Translation of “Manchester Document,” (New York: U.S. Department of Justice, 2000, Page 47

⁷ Mary W. Green, The Appropriate and Effective Use of Security Technologies in U.S. Schools: A Guide for Schools and Law Enforcement Agencies (Washington: U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, 1999).

**FACTOR'S
PROACTIVE
SCHOOL
SECURITY™
PROGRAM
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THE PERCEPTION
AND REALITY OF
SCHOOL
SECURITY**

consider their security plans from a systems perspective—looking at the big picture of what they are trying to achieve in order to arrive at the optimal security strategy.” The DOJ emphasized this because schools must know their specific risks to develop effective security strategies. Therefore, schools can only improve their security by taking a process-based, quantitative approach to identifying and mitigating their specific risks.

Factor Security & Continuity developed Proactive School Security™ (PSS) to boost both the perception and reality of school security. PSS, an educational adaptation of Factor’s Proactive Enterprise Security™ program, centers on process-based, quantitative analysis to identify and mitigate security and disaster risks. By providing three-dimensional risk assessment, PSS equips decision-makers to make the best security and disaster risk mitigation decisions.

PSS also syncs security and disaster planning with a holistic, top-down philosophy. By combining security and disaster planning PSS is of great value to any school regardless of size. Combining security and disaster planning not only reduces duplication of effort while saving valuable resources; it also maximizes the effectiveness of risk mitigation strategies.

In addition to improving real-world security and safety of schools PSS produces a wealth of independent, quantitative data on a school’s critical assets and processes, threats, and vulnerabilities. This information provides school leadership with a comprehensive view of the areas in which they should focus resources. When those resources are not present, this information is indispensable in justifying grant requests to obtain resources they need to implement security mitigation strategies.

As school tragedies continue to mount the public concern over school security continues to build. In this wide-spread concern a groundswell of support for fundamentally improving school security exists. PSS empowers schools to address public concerns by substantially improving school security. PSS goes beyond making schools feel safe, it actually makes them safer.

Contact Factor

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About the Author:

Aaron L. Gehlken, President of Factor Security & Continuity, LLC. (www.factorsecurity.com), is a former US Air Force Intelligence Officer who built the 2004 National Operations Security Organizational Achievement Award Winning program from the ground up in less than 10 months. In addition to being a successful corporate and government security manager, he is an expert in business continuity disaster recovery, competitive intelligence, organizational behavior and operational signatures, counter/antiterrorism, and Middle Eastern policy. He is also fluent in Persian-Farsi.