

The Fight to Improve K-12 School Security

and How You Can Help

By Robert Boyd

In May, DHI and 11 other organizations joined the Secure Schools Alliance (the Alliance) in petitioning President Trump to include K-12 public school security infrastructure, security technology and life safety systems in his infrastructure proposals. The rationale for requesting federal support for security and life safety improvements is simple: As identified in the National Infrastructure Protection Plan, K-12 public schools are a part of U.S. national critical infrastructure. Despite this fact, federal resources have not been provided to protect the security infrastructure of such schools—and they're needed now more than ever.

Every school day, America's public schools house nearly 50 million students and 6 million adults, in 100,000 buildings, encompassing 7.5 billion gross square feet of space, on 2 million acres of public land. It's very concerning, then, that the 2017 Infrastructure Report Card gave schools a D+. Beyond the failing grade, the report card is notable because it does not address what upgrades are needed to the security infrastructure, security technology and life safety systems of those schools.

While the report did mention the secondary use of public school facilities as "emergency shelters during man-made or natural disasters," it failed to speak at all to the primary use of school facilities. Per the Education Commission on the States, the average school year is 180 days or 49 percent of the calendar year. According to the 2016 *State of our Schools* report, state and local governments invest more in K-12 public schools (24 percent) than any other infrastructure sector outside of highways (32 percent). In fact, that report states annual capital investment, maintenance and

operations spending from state and local governments on K-12 facilities is \$99 billion per year.

On the other hand, the report card notes, "... the federal government contributes little to no funding for the nation's K-12 educational facilities." Given the "staggering scale" of investment, spending and use of schools by so much of the American population (17 percent), it can certainly be argued that the federal government should share more in the investment of protecting our children and those who care for them daily for half of the year.

Since the tragedy of 9/11, the federal government has done an excellent job of protecting high-value targets—like federal office buildings, power plants and dams—from attack. Today, with the rise of both global and homegrown terrorism, the domestic homeland security emphasis has shifted to soft targets like schools. According to Brenda Heck, deputy assistant director of the FBI Counterterrorism Division, "...soft targets are now a priority for terrorists determined to inflict damage in the United States... This is a world where soft targets are the name of the game."

Unfortunately, terrorism is not the only threat of violence that schools face. One study, *Violence in K-12 Schools 1974-2013*, found almost all mass incidents of violence in elementary schools were committed by individual intruders who aren't connected to terrorist groups. The common denominator in the threat to public schools, then, is not generally the attacker, but the security readiness of the facility. Well, security readiness can be fixed and intruders can be stopped.

The Sandy Hook Advisory Commission made specific recommendations for improving school

facility security, and the State of New Jersey has gone so far as mandating security improvements for new and existing schools. With appropriate attention and funding, public schools can conduct the security steps needed to stop intruders before they have an opportunity to commit violence. In fact, most security improvements to school facilities may also aid in the reduction of school-based violence and assist authorities in the identification and containment of violence when it occurs.

Additionally, improving school security infrastructure means creating local jobs. While there are no hard estimates for improvements, security industry representatives and others have estimated an approximate \$100,000 price tag for bringing an average school to a basic security level. A school security infrastructure program could impact up to 500,000 small businesses and could create work for up to 1.5 million workers nationally—a substantial benefit for local communities.

Still, the Plan to Rebuild America's Infrastructure does not currently address the needs of America's K-12 public schools that could not only ensure better protection for our children but also create substantial jobs and spending benefits for our local communities. As the Alliance and its partners continue to address this funding issue, there are new tools and guidelines being created to outline best practices.

To help schools identify their security and safety needs, the Alliance has released a list of safety and security facility assessments for K-12 public schools. The Alliance partnered with the Police Foundation and Dr. Erroll Southers of TAL Global to develop the list, which is based on a review of existing open-source federal and state information. As a result, school officials, working with local law enforcement professionals, can access and use the most comprehensive assessment tools available, at no cost.

To create effective security plans, the Partner Alliance for Safer Schools (PASS) offers free guidelines for creating plans once assessments have been completed. As they point out, funding is a key to making schools safe. PASS offers planning guidelines with tiered suggestions for making the difficult budgetary decisions that school administrators are often faced with.

The Alliance, working with the Police Foundation, reviewed available state level information on school security and safety programs and resources. Despite notable exceptions, state and local resources for school security have been limited or are completely unavailable. (For a breakdown of state-by-state school security resources, visit <https://seureschoolresources.org/>.)

As you know, not all security enhancements are good or appropriate solutions. All improvements to the security infrastructure of schools should meet applicable codes and laws. Unfortunately, uninformed parent groups, seeking simple solutions to classroom security issues, have been drawn to “barricade” devices. They are supported and encouraged by companies selling cheap devices that purport to secure classrooms. In some situations, lawmakers have had ties to these companies. The use of these devices must not be allowed.

The recent defeat of attempts to modify NFPA 101 to allow two releasing operations for egress was a key victory for those who champion life safety issues, but it was only one step. Appeals have been filed and we will continue to oppose any changes. Efforts are also underway to allow the use of “barricade” type devices in America's classrooms, despite their likely violation of the *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)*, the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973*, the *International Fire Codes* and the *International Building Codes*.

The Alliance is working with disability rights advocates, such as the National Disabilities Rights Network, to explore ways, including legal recourse, to block the use of non-conforming locking devices in classrooms. Communities don't have to sacrifice life safety for security. Fire codes have kept people safe for many years and laws, such as the ADA, aim to protect vulnerable populations. We must continue to abide by these statutes and codes. We must show parents and policymakers that there are affordable solutions that meet codes and can be used to secure our nation's schools.

What can you do to help the Alliance and its partners fight to improve K-12 public school security? Contact your elected representatives at all levels to support our efforts. Contact your federal legislators and ask for support of infrastructure funding. Contact your state legislators and local education agencies to spread awareness of the safe, affordable solutions available from the door and hardware industry. Please help us keep this conversation going—it's more important than ever before. ■



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