

# 4 Ways to Improve School Visitor Management

The right policies, building design and electronic security solutions can overcome many of the weaknesses associated with paper logs and low-tech visitor name tags.



*Identification cards are a big step toward improved visitor management, although paper cards have their limitations.*

**By Eric Schaeffer · June 22, 2016**

It's not just seventh grade math that is complex. Equally head-scratching for parents, teachers and school administrators is how to ensure that visitors to K-12 educational institutions have a right to be there and are properly identified and recorded.

There are a host of reasons why a school would want to screen people before they can enter the building, ranging from fear of violence to unresolved custody disputes, to the need to keep track of everyone in the building in case of an emergency.

School-related shootings by outsiders have made the headlines in recent years and have raised awareness among school administrators about the need for vigilance.

Preventing sex offenders from gaining access to students is also a reason schools want to screen visitors. Registered sex offenders may target a school, as was the case recently in Raleigh, N.C., where a known offender tried to gain access to an elementary school using a forged letter from the principal. But the offender population can also include parents, other relatives, friends or guardians of children attending a specific institution.

Incorrect, incomplete or illegible paper sign-in systems also leave schools vulnerable if an incident occurs. If there is a fire or some other emergency that requires building occupants to shelter in place or evacuate, a school will need to have a comprehensive tally of who is in the building.

However, paper logs also run the risk of being damaged or forgotten in a crisis, and security personnel or first responders won't be able to access the information remotely if they aren't able to get to the office or station where the log is stored.

Additionally, often these hand-written logs are tied in with certain types of paper badges that can be easily duplicated or reused after being discarded by the legitimate user. As a result of the inconsistencies of paper-based systems, schools have begun implementing a combination of electronic visitor management and access control procedures along with best practices that tighten the reins over who can gain access to the school.

Here are some of the steps schools can take toward implementing a more effective visitor management program:

**1. Funnel visitors to one location:** Even before visitors reach the sign-in or badging station, schools should funnel visitors to a central location. Older schools are especially vulnerable with multiple entrances and winding hallways that present opportunities for visitors to bypass the main office or visitor center. A clearly marked entrance and access-controls on all other doors, however, will send visitors in the right direction. Once inside, if the main office is far from the primary doorway, there should be a badging station or security personnel near the authorized entrance so visitors can be met and enrolled immediately.

**2. Consider pre-enrollment:** Another alternative is to pre-enroll parents and frequent visitors, vendors or school district personnel with identification cards so they can have their badges or cards scanned and verified as they enter the building. Some schools may tie this in with access codes on exterior card readers that allow visitors into the school at specific times.

The cost of permanent ID cards can be more expensive than paper badges, but the upside is that they can contain information about the

individual and can be "turned off" if a person's status has changed.

**3. Link your system to federal or state-controlled databases:** While schools can gather information about visitors and build that into a database, situations do evolve over time. Systems that allow self-registration are vulnerable to misinformation or missing data, and even those that access third-party data maintained by the visitor management supplier may be hampered by old or incomplete information gathered from court records. Typically systems that are linked to a federal or state government-controlled database can offer a wider range of information.

**4. Adopt upgraded access control and video surveillance systems:** Access control systems joined with video also allow schools to control visitation by identifying people before they enter campus. Through the use of exterior cameras or cameras placed in the main vestibule, someone in the school office can view and identify the visitor and then grant or deny them access.

In conjunction with this, some schools are also installing lockdown buttons in the main office or classrooms, so if an intruder does gain access, they can quickly lock doors or restrict access.

Visitor management may be viewed as a time-consuming step by those trying to gain access to schools. Informing parents and frequent visitors in advance about the process and enforcing it on a consistent basis will not only make it less of a burden for those involved, but it will ultimately raise the level of protection for students and faculty alike.

Eric Schaeffer is the President of Advantech, a full-service systems integration company based in Dover, Del. Schaeffer is a member of Security-Net. He can be reached at [ericschaeffer@advantechsecurity.net](mailto:ericschaeffer@advantechsecurity.net).