Blogs

Emphasizing an Often-Neglected but Critical Piece of MNEC

Emergency notification should be push-button, not a part of a checklist.

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Communication is paramount when people gather together, whether it be for an event or everyday meeting such as during business or education. As the perception that weather events, accidents and acts of violence are on the rise, so is the interest in using communication technology to inform and move people in an emergency quickly (or to mobilize them). This renewed sense of urgency is creating an impetus to build mass notification systems that people will respond to and feel helped by.

As a nation, we have developed authorities responsible for developing the response protocols and emergency system initiating criteria for when our environment becomes toxic.  The first step in all of these response plans is based on how to communicate the existence of a condition and then instruct and mobilize the group in the direction that makes them safer. The goal and perhaps more specifically the responsibility of our authorities is to identify the best way to communicate and mobilize the intended recipients in a way that assists them to find safety in an unsafe situation.

The method to communicate is and has been provided by a multitude of communication technologies that have evolved over time. When I was a kid in school our principal would stand at the end of the hall with a bull horn bellowing out instructions or the old bell system would go off to indicate a threat of some kind.  Today we all have access to smartphones and every example of communication methodologies that exists between the two. But each communication tool must be carefully explored to see if it is useful in your specific case.

The K-12 marketplace has undertaken a massive effort to mitigate the danger during a crisis event.  The reaction has been to revert to standard response as dictated by integrators and security professionals, which is to install access control and CCTV.  They are the automatic selection for schools when a plan to create a safer environment is developed.  We are all aware of the recent push for schools to do “something” to make them safer, including the restructuring of entrances, increasing the population of school resource officers and even training kids how to challenge and fight back when faced with an armed intruder.

When it comes to preparing for a crisis situation our public schools have an advantage over the general populous in a public space. They have an opportunity to prepare and drill or train for the appropriate response to any one of many potential crisis events.  We do this for many reasons but arguably the main reason is to reduce the amount of time it takes to mobilize the inhabitants of our schools towards safety in a timely manner.  Unfortunately we’ve had too many scenarios unfold in front of us. Fortunately we have learned one valuable lesson.  Many survivors indicate their ability to get away was determined by “seconds” or “inches.”  The lesson is that seconds do count.

So I find it is with some irony that schools are responding to the call for building a more secure environment by installing or adding to systems that address only part of the issue and further, with systems that either become defeated early on or are only used for the forensic study of what to do “next time.”  This is also new.  We’ve gone from a “that will never happen here” to “the next time it happens” society in a fairly short amount of time.

While the ability to view events during or after they happen is a key part of building a secure environment, being able to actually manage the crisis is difficult to plan. In the K-12 environment this is often rarely if ever considered when the discussion of building a secure environment takes place.  This is evidenced by the many recent grant opportunities provided to public education facilities to help fund the provisioning of systems designed to enhance safety.  Although the general premise of the funding is for security, the specific systems rarely include anything outside access control and CCTV. In addition, through programs like E-rate, federal funding to bring the Internet and the latest technology to our schools far outweighs the funding provided to help make them a safer environment.  As an industry I believe it is incumbent upon us to push our legislators to address this.

Securing a school environment is like a pie with three pieces.  Access control is definitely one of those pieces, but as we know it is not without vulnerabilities.  CCTV is also a very valuable piece but it is far too often relegated to a forensic tool.  Most if not all examples of these events begin and end within the average time it takes traditional first responders to arrive at the scene.  By then the access control has been compromised and the CCTV is (again) relegated to forensics.

The third and often overlooked piece of this pie is the management during the crisis. Our line of thinking has to be adjusted.  Police, fire, EMTs are not necessarily the “first responders” to these events.  They are the first responders with the training to provide an organized and tactical effort in response to a crisis.  The actual first responders are the school’s staff and they need the tools to manage that crisis as it is happening.  Simply “beefing up” access control and CCTV systems doesn’t go far enough to create as safe an environment as possible during a crisis.  The most reasonable and likely tool the first responders will use is the school’s PA system. It’s the one system the administrators at Sandy Hook turned to first when attempting warn teachers and staff that something was horribly wrong.  In an effort to manage the crisis the administrators at Sandy Hook turned to the internal communication system first — not the access control and not the cameras.

Today, tools that transmit emergency messages have also evolved to include the use of a school’s IP network. The result is often an increase in the speed to notify and subsequently mobilize the inhabitants of our schools.  The importance and relevance of our school’s intercom system needs to be brought to the top of the agenda and not relegated to the background as it has been.  The message should not be just a notification that there is a crisis; it has to be about managing the emergency.

[Telecor](http://www.telecor.com/)’s Visual Console is a great example of a catalyst for automating and sending this message in a variety of formats to several different audiences both on and off-premises.  In the case of Telecor’s Visual Console, a crisis response just went from multiple steps to one.  As an example, in almost every school I visit, dialing 911 under a lockdown condition still requires someone to pick up the phone and actually dial 911.  On the other hand, a fire alarm (as required by code) is automatically sent to a central station for the appropriate dispatch of corresponding personnel.  Why do we not automate the notification to a central station under a lockdown condition?  The technology exists; it just appears that the discussion hasn’t gone that far yet.

Remember, we’re talking about seconds.  Getting the information out isn’t enough anymore.  Reducing the time that it takes to get that message out is even more important.  Using a “cheat sheet” or memorizing several steps in a particular response is too prone to failure and depending on the one or two people trained to activate a crisis response is a perfect recipe for Murphy’s Law.  Anyone can be trained how to push a button and when.  Integrators using Telecor communication technology have the ability to help schools develop systems and strategies that help them manage a crisis and not just indicate the existence of one.  This can and should be achieved by using all the systems already present in almost every school. PA systems, access control, CCTV, fire alarms, phone systems and networks are all important components and should all be considered in the planning and development of a crisis management protocol.

The challenge here is to put our industry in a position to be a part of the design conversation.  We need to be creative, energetic and focused on communicating the importance of a complete and robust approach to building a secure K-12 environment.