

storyboard

Security Checkpoint

Three years after Sandy Hook, the horrific tragedy spurred schools to intensify security efforts

Dennis Pierce

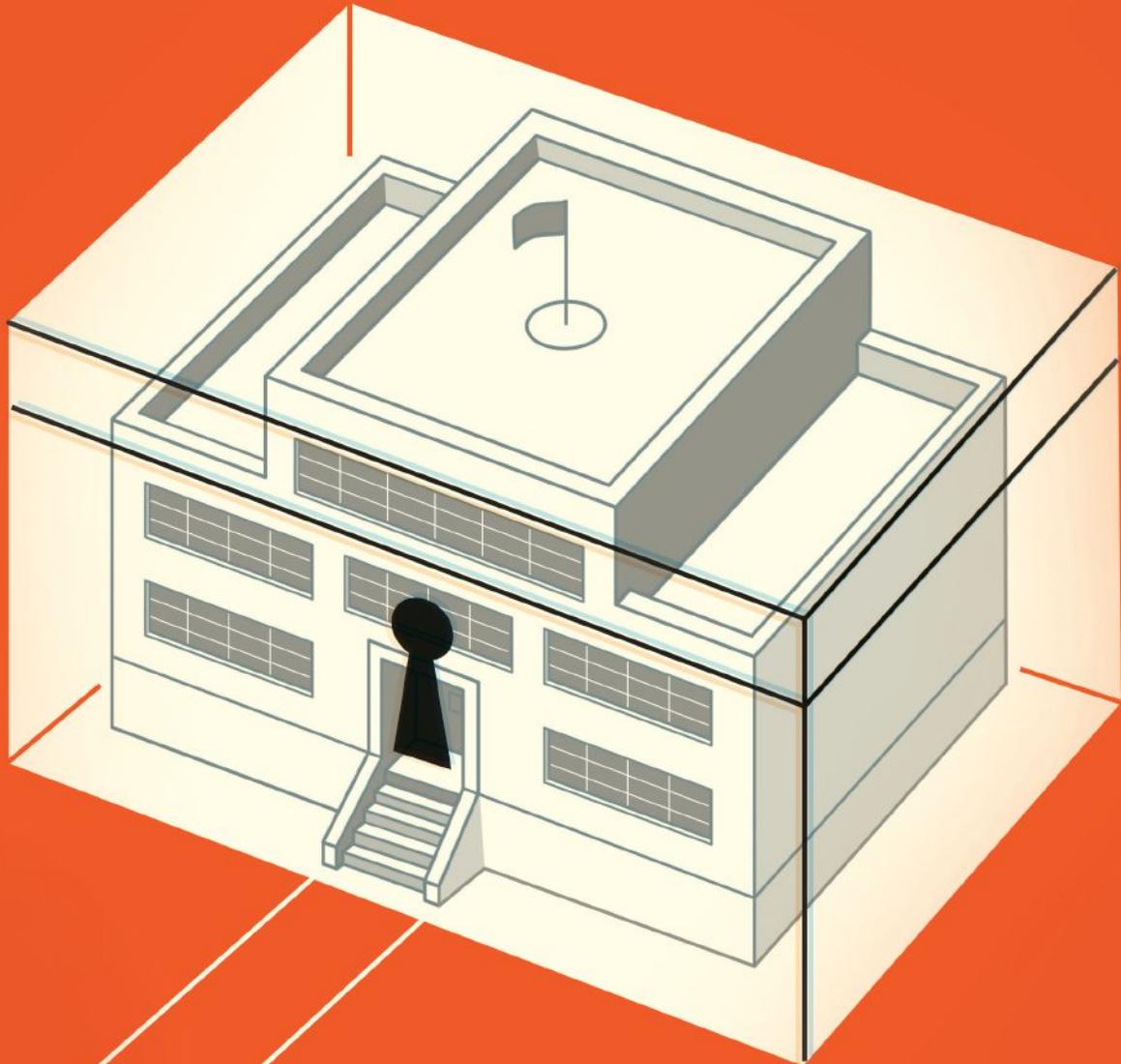


Illustration: Harry Campbell

In Hudson, Ohio, the city's middle and high schools had security cameras for a number of years. Administrators carried two-way radios, and each school practiced lockdown drills twice per year to prepare for possible intruders.

But after the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, that claimed the lives of 20 children and six staff members in December 2012, this suburban district of 4,600 students began holding monthly lockdown drills and added secure entrances to all of its schools.

"We've always had a focus on security, but that has evolved over the years," says Hudson City Schools Superintendent Phil Herman. "Each time there's another tragedy, we learn from that."

Hudson City isn't alone. Nationwide, schools have ratcheted up their security measures since the Sandy Hook tragedy, according to a U.S. Education Department survey released in May.

For instance, 82 percent of schools last year reported having a mass notification system that automatically notifies parents in the event of an emergency, up from about six in 10 schools four years earlier. Slightly fewer than half of schools (47 percent) had a system that allowed someone to report a crime anonymously, compared with 36 percent four years earlier.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the K-12 and higher-education markets for access control, video surveillance equipment, and mass notification systems totaled \$768 million in 2014—but that number is expected to increase to more than \$900 million by 2016.

Here are some of the additional security efforts that schools have made since Sandy Hook, the largest mass shooting at a K-12 facility in U.S. history.

SECURED VESTIBULES

Pennsylvania's North Penn School District completed a \$2.5 million renovation plan this past summer that

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How U.S. Schools Approach Security

U.S. public schools reported various safety measures in 2013-14, including...



93% Control access to buildings during school hours



88% Have a written crisis response plan



82% Have an emergency notification system



75% Use security cameras



70% Practice their emergency response plan with students



68% Require faculty ID badges



48% Train staff to recognize early warning signs of violence



47% Use an anonymous threat reporting system



43% Employ security personnel on campus at least once a week



9% Require student ID badges

(Source: National Center for Education Statistics, May 2015)

included secured vestibules for six elementary schools and a new camera system tied into the district's current system, says Security Coordinator Ray Wilson.

The project will allow visitors to enter each school only through a secure, locked vestibule area—and they can only be buzzed in after they are checked through a visitor management system and receive a badge, Wilson says.

“We used to use a buzzer system, which only allows security or a secretary to see a two-inch screen,” he says. “We will now have new cameras that will give a high-resolution picture showing a full body shot, in case someone is carrying a weapon or suspicious package.”

The district's other seven elementary schools already have these secured vestibules, which were completed during other renovation projects, Wilson says.

VISITOR MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

North Penn also is using a system from Raptor Technologies to screen visitors against a national database of registered sex offenders, as well as monitor custodial requests, print guest ID badges, and track who is entering and leaving its facilities. The system is web-based, so its records are available even during an emergency evacuation.

Once a secretary or other staff member scans a visitor's drivers license or other identification, the system runs a background check against all 50 states' databases of known criminals and registered sex offenders. “The whole process takes less than a minute, and once you are in the system it can just retrieve your record,” says Raptor CEO Jim Vesterman.

A key threat to student safety, Vesterman says, is the picking up of students by unauthorized adults. Too many schools rely on paper files—or a secretary's recall—to determine who should have custody of a child, he says. With Raptor's software, this information is stored in the system, and it doesn't matter who is at the front desk, he says; anyone can see instantly who should have access to a student.

“I'm not afraid of a terrorist, really,” Wilson says. “I'm most worried about a child's [guardian] who wants to do us harm.”

DOOR AND WINDOW SECURITY

Part of North Penn's \$2.5 million upgrade project was installing a relatively new film from manufacturer 3M

to the first floor windows of all its buildings.

More cost-effective than replacing windows and doors with laminated glass, 3M's Safety and Security Film is a reinforcing material that makes the glass shatter-resistant, the company says. Even if an intruder tries to smash the glass with a hammer, it can take up to 90 seconds to break through—which could buy staff precious time to initiate a lockdown.

The Sandy Hook perpetrator "shot out the door glass and it shattered, and he was able to instantly gain access to the interior of the school," Wilson says.

Hudson City has purchased new barrier devices to secure the doors in its classrooms and other interior spaces, Herman says. Developed by Hudson community member Bill Cushwa in response to Sandy Hook and a local shooting in Ohio, the Bearcade system reportedly can withstand more than 4,500 pounds of external force but is lightweight, easy to deploy, and more cost-effective than changing out the locks.

"We view it like a fire extinguisher or an automated external defibrillator," Cushwa says. "If you need it, it's there—but hopefully you never have to use it."

Time is of the essence during an emergency situation, Cushwa says, noting that the Sandy Hook shooting was over in less than six minutes. Products like the Bearcade and 3M's security film can help "give emergency first responders a chance to respond."

IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

While technology can help keep schools safe, these products should be individual choices, says Ronald Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center. "It's fine to look at security devices," he says, "but make sure they work within your budget and fit within your school culture."

While the Sandy Hook shooter was an outsider, most such incidents involve per-

sons connected with the school, Stephens says. That's why it's critical for school districts to convene threat assessment teams, work with mental health professionals and local law enforcement officials, invest in counseling services, and employ curriculum support strategies such as problem solving and conflict resolution.

"The best thing we can do to keep schools safe is invest in our relationships between students, staff, and parents," Herman says. "That does more to keep students safe than anything else."

Part of establishing good relationships is making sure students are comfortable talking to adults and reporting what they see. "We practice 'see something, say something,'" Herman says, adding that Hudson City has an anonymous help line for stakeholders to report potential safety issues.

Despite these added security measures—or perhaps because of them—schools are safer now than they were four years ago, the federal survey suggests. Sixty-five percent of U.S. public schools reported a violent incident such as a rape, fight, robbery, or threat of a physical attack in 2013-14, down from 74 percent in 2009-10.

Stephens says, "The reality is, schools continue to be the safest place for youth to be."

Dennis Pierce (denniswpierce@gmail.com) is a freelance writer who has been covering education for nearly 20 years.

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