Designing a safe school requires more than just built solutions

districtadministration.com/designing-a-safe-school-requires-more-than-just-built-solutions

Preparation, partnerships, and social programs are paramount to maintaining the quality and safety of the educational environment.

By: Ben Thompson | December 21, 2021

(AdobeStock)

The feeling of being safe, secure, and seen are psychologically foundational to providing a learning environment where students can thrive. For students to learn, process and retain the knowledge and skills they are taught in school, a level of comfort must be established in a learner's mind before attention and focus can be given to their best efforts.

So many aspects of school design are aimed at providing that level of comfort. However, design can't provide this alone — it is created through the convergence of design principles, policy prescriptions, and day-to-day routines in the learning environment. This extends into literally thousands of aspects of school life, but it is typified in how violence is addressed in schools from a design standpoint. While school shootings are a small percentage of the gun violence that takes place in the U.S., the fear they have created has changed the way kids feel about going to school.

Ben Thompson is a principal and K-12 studio director of McMillan Pazdan Smith, a design firm.

The desire for comfort and recognition of the real fear students experience has changed the way designers think about school design. Since K-12 architecture is focused on creating the best possible learning environment, designers must be conscious of the array of possible risks on a school campus. Incorporating built solutions that protect students and faculty from these risks instills the sense of safety that has become a top priority.

However, there is more required to create a safe school campus than physical security measures — preparation, partnerships and social programs are paramount to maintaining the quality and safety of the educational environment. It takes intention and focus for everyone involved to create the right conditions and the best environment for learning.

Physical security measures

Incorporating physical security measures into K-12 schools must be done with care and tact; overt security and surveillance equipment can make students perceive risk and feel uncomfortable. In many ways, these measures can psychologically induce the opposite of

their intended effects.

"Research shows that schools need to be welcoming and encouraging to draw students into the building," said Dr. Joanne Avery, retired superintendent of Anderson School District 4 in Pendleton, South Carolina. "This welcoming environment leads to less aggressive behavior, vandalism and absenteeism."

However, this doesn't mean security measures and appliances should be completely avoided. It means careful thought must be lent to their location, visibility, and prominence in the design of schools.

Entry points

Creating multiple layers of access supports the administration's ability to control who is on campus. Clearly identifiable entry points into and out of the building for different occupants (student bus riders, student drivers, teachers/faculty, service providers, and parents during school hours) can help limit congestion during typical school days.

If possible, there should be only one visitor entryway. This entryway should have a security vestibule with limited physical contact with staff for visitor check-in. Upon check-in, visitors should then be moved to a waiting area without access to main circulation paths within the school, and finally a controlled entrance with access to the interior of the school. Entrance to the school proper should be guided by staff.

Devices that control the locking mechanisms of all entrances and exits should be installed. Consider augmenting or "hardening" entry and exit points based on risk and/or operational use. Since teachers don't always have time to lock the door when responding to school shootings, classroom door hardware should stay locked by default. This can be handled any number of ways that don't impede normal movement.

Interior campus security

Arrange pedestrian walkways and landscaping to encourage circulation toward secure points when considering the scenarios of campus and building use. Some might include pick-up and drop-off times, after-hours athletic events, performances, outdoor learning activities during the school day, and physical education or playground use.

While maintaining openness and visibility, divide the school into manageable zones separated by barriers or doors. This can be accomplished by breaking academics into wings or "houses," or providing zones for shared core areas like fine and performing arts, media centers and dining rooms.

Consider using more glazing on the interior of schools. This may seem counterintuitive, but providing passive visibility can help reduce bullying to produce a more positive social environment. Augment passive visibility with active security systems ranging from classroom

door locks to security cameras.

Thoughtfully arranged landscaping and fencing can further enhance access control by reducing or eliminating public access to outdoor learning or athletic areas where possible.

However, each safety and security measure provided in the design of a school can fail without robust practice and procedures from administrators, teachers and staff. Controlling access is often simpler in elementary schools — it can be easier to enter a busy high school, so receptionists must be empowered to deny entry to unauthorized visitors.

Bringing natural light inside the building and into the learning environment has been proven to have positive learning effects. Instead of decreasing outside windows into spaces, arrange and design with risk in mind. For example, in areas where students are on the inside of a large window or wall of windows, colorful one-way vinyl coverings allow occupants to see outside the building while blocking the view into the building from the outside. Another way is to orient the learning spaces to capture natural daylight in a secure courtyard arrangement. Above all, designers should be as intentional in design as teachers are when instructing.

Partnerships help with preparation, prevention and response

On top of providing student resource officers to schools of all age levels, local law enforcement partners can act as a threat assessment team to help schools to identify any vulnerable areas and develop a facility-specific plan for active shooter events. As we've tragically witnessed with recent deadly events like the shooting at Oxford High School, threats can include drawings, writings, and social media posts. No threat should be ignored and when concerning student behavior is identified, parents need to be educated on intervention methods that can be applied at home as well as school.

Local law enforcement, community outreach organizations and mentorship programs can also help provide community-specific services to students and their families. These resources can make all the difference for at-risk students outside of the classroom who may need access to mental health services, academic assistance or healthy socialization.

Teachers, staff, and any adult who is in the building on a regular basis should have a thorough understanding of all of the protocols in place that prevent bad actors from gaining access — things like keeping exterior doors locked and using visitor control systems and practices. They should also be well-versed in the plan of action that must be followed in the event of an active shooter and participate in active shooter drills.

Social programs

Bully prevention programs are very important. Schools should have zero tolerance for bullying and offer support to those who are bullied. It's imperative to also teach students the right expectations, fairness, respect, and compassion. This helps establish actions and

behaviors that compel them to speak up instead of being a bystander when they witness someone being bullied.

In cases where a student has committed an expellable offense by harming themselves or others, administrators and law enforcement must become heavily involved in outreach and intervention efforts. Not necessarily only through expulsion or the juvenile justice system, but by offering mental health resources and support for the student and their family.

"I am strongly opposed to expelling students who are at risk of hurting themselves or others," Avery said. "The school system must create a path for these students to continue their education while providing mental health assessments and resources to improve their lives and uphold the safety of the community."

Creating the safest educational environments requires a holistic approach that goes beyond physical security to address the social and emotional needs of at-risk students while preparing faculty with comprehensive action plans that take over when the unthinkable happens.

Ben Thompson, AIA, ALEP, is a Principal and K-12 Studio Director of McMillan Pazdan Smith, a regional, studio-based design firm with offices in Greenville, Charleston and Spartanburg, SC; Asheville and Charlotte, NC; and Atlanta, GA. He can be reached at bthompson@mcmillanpazdansmith.com.

Topics: Construction | Legislation/legal affairs | Op-ed | Security