



# SECURITY IN SCHOOLS

**Cris Francis** examines what can be done to the perimeter of educational establishments to ensure the continued safety of those that study there

**E**very day, over 30,000 schools across the UK become second homes to more than 10 million children. Within these learning institutions, young minds are developed, moulded and inspired. The trust that parents place daily in school staff not only to educate their kids, but protect them from harm is the foundation on which this essential service lies.

A secure learning environment, however, relies on far more than just a diligent and committed staff within classroom walls. A comprehensive security infrastructure and regime ensures that visitors, students and teachers alike are welcomed into a safe space while deterring and keeping unwanted visitors out. Grounds protected by secure perimeters, good

access control and surveillance systems are the foundation of a healthy learning environment.

To discover if as much as possible is being done to give students and teachers peace of mind, Jacksons Fencing commissioned research for a special report: *Protecting The Future*. The report polled 1,000 parents (a nationally representative sample), asking them about a range of security issues. Joining them were the views of 280 teachers (including nearly 50 head teachers) and 75 architects.

It found that head teachers are faced with a difficult balancing act between providing appropriate levels of security and not enough. While 31 percent of parents feel that school security is over the top these days, a quarter don't think their child's school has been



securely designed. A similar disparity is found among teachers, where a quarter find security measures are excessive while three in ten say their schools have weaknesses in their perimeters. Of most concern is that 6 percent of teachers simply don't feel that their school is secure enough.

It's clear that current perimeter standards are inadequate. A third of teachers and 36 percent of parents know of children leaving school during the day without permission. A further 40 percent of teachers know of trespassers coming on site.

## DESIGN FLAWS

These incidences occur despite 80 percent of heads having had their perimeter and gates inspected within the past five years, leading to the conclusion that inspectors are overlooking key design flaws.

In an environment of increased capacity pressure and harsh budget constraints, perimeter maintenance and refurbishment can easily slip down the list of priorities. With more students than ever before, it is increasingly important that the key security issues affecting security in schools are identified so that they can be mitigated.

The research reveals that parents' primary concern matches that of teachers: trespassers. Their concerns aren't unfounded. Two fifths of parents and staff have heard of unauthorised visitors getting on site. This is exacerbated by the use of premises and grounds outside of school hours for community, sports and other activities. The vast majority of teachers say their schools allow access to members of the community whether for evening clubs and events, special open days or otherwise (88 percent). Schools are also accessible in other ways, with a third of those surveyed having grounds bisected by a public footpath.

Other physical challenges are presented by a schools' layout. Teachers said school security is most affected by having more than one entrance (56 percent), followed by multiple buildings (34 percent) and areas not easily visible to staff (30 percent). Some schools are made even less secure by poor control over access. It was revealed that over one in 10 schools have no gates (13 percent). All of these issues combine to make keeping unwanted visitors out and pupils in challenging.

With three quarters of head teachers feeling solely responsible for pupil safety, it's no wonder their biggest

headache is children leaving without permission and putting themselves at risk. Unauthorised exits are worryingly common, known to happen by 36 percent of parents and a third of teachers. Ultimately, poor access control and compromised perimeter protection is allowing these exits to take place, including nearly half of kids who leave through a door and those who climb the fence (24 percent) or squeeze through a gap in the boundary (8 percent).

What's particularly worrying is the ages of those getting out without supervision. A quarter of parents know of primary-aged pupils leaving school, with 7 percent citing incidents of children under six.

Undoubtedly contributing to unauthorised exit and entry are the weaknesses in perimeters identified by teachers. Fences present a number of issues: ageing (30 percent), instability (12 percent) and gaps (11 percent). Although 64 percent of heads have replaced their fencing and gates at least once, problems continue.

**6 PERCENT OF TEACHERS POLLED SIMPLY DON'T FEEL THAT THEIR SCHOOL IS SECURE ENOUGH**

While teachers and parents expressed fears about schools being not secure enough, architects point to issues with perimeter specifications, which aren't keeping pace with societal changes. New schools benefit from a raft of compliance points and guidelines, including the provision that there should be a single main site entrance. While logical, this isn't much help to the majority (67 percent) of all schools built between 1944 and 1976.

Nearly three quarters of architects find that replacement fencing and gate specifications are usually the original ones (71 percent), allowing existing issues to be perpetuated into the future. Part of the issue appears to be budget, which architects identify as the greatest challenge when installing school fencing. This is particularly concerning given the number of architects saying schools are negatively affected by multiple entrances (89 percent) and an old perimeter (72 percent).

**Controlling access to and from the school holds the key to keeping students safe from harm**

While there is no quick or catch-all solution for the range of security issues faced by schools today, architects are well positioned to help head teachers both protect and welcome their pupils.

First, good communication between architects and school leaders, including those responsible for the management of school facilities, is crucial. It's no surprise that safety concerns are exacerbated by the fact that four in 10 heads in the study did not know where to go to find out more about school security and access control. By providing advice and directing them towards relevant resources, architects can play an instrumental part in improving safety and security standards when called upon. Physical safeguarding, meanwhile, should perhaps be considered for inclusion in the Department for Education (DfE) standards and statutory guidance for auditing by Ofsted where its current position does not support evaluating perimeter security.

Being able to offer clear guidance relies on first having a good knowledge of current standards on fencing and gates. Nearly all (95 percent) architects are familiar with Secured by Design (SBD), the national police crime prevention initiative through which products can be accredited by meeting set criteria. Encouragingly, half of architects are seeing the use of SBD standards increasingly specified.

### WITHSTANDING AN ATTACK

One of the most widely accepted security accreditation standards is delivered through certification by the Loss Prevention Certification Board. Its LPS 1175 security rating (SR) system tests products and awards security ratings from SR1 up to SR5 (in the case of fencing). The ratings are based on how long a product can withstand a sustained attack with different classes of tools. Unlike the case with SBD, half of architects don't know about LPS 1175. There is an excellent opportunity here for architects to offer more security options to both schools and other clients, tailoring specifications to individual site needs.

The school fence, entrance gates and access control should be considered not only for today, but also in anticipation of the future. To ensure an appropriate and futureproof perimeter strategy, a thorough risk assessment should be carried out. This should include area demographics, crime rates, access points, types of risk, aesthetics, usage and the local landscape.

Access control is not only about where people enter the school site, but also how and when. While over half (56 percent) of teachers say their school has more than one entrance, where practicable, these should be reviewed, ideally to provide one main access point located in clear view of the reception or school office, to allow natural surveillance of pupils, staff, visitors and vehicle access. Where there are other access points, it's good practice to restrict access to during peak times or as required. Plan as well for clearly displayed signs that indicate access times and direct all other visitors to the main entrance.

Depending on their location, schools are vulnerable to different risks, from theft and vandalism to arson and anti-social behaviour. Public buildings can be targeted for their construction materials, such as copper and steel. Other risks include heavy pedestrian and vehicle traffic, deliveries and fencing which young pupils might

be tempted to climb. Any perimeter solution should be tailored to meet a site's specific risks.

One fifth of parents describe school security as over the top and prison-like. It's clear, however, that the school environment needs to project a welcoming feeling while keeping those within its boundaries safe. Many security fences are available in a range of colours and styles, which can soften a perimeter's appearance. In many cases, colour-coated metal railings will be most suitable, while for nurseries and primary schools, timber fencing might be preferable for its 'friendlier' appearance and greater privacy.

A school's security and access needs change throughout the day, requiring an operations-friendly layout. Heavy pedestrian and vehicular traffic at peak times of day, such as immediately before or after school hours, benefit from separate traffic routes to reduce the risk of accidents. While nearly half (45 percent) of schools employ manual gates exclusively, there are benefits to both manual and automated gates and often a combination is most appropriate.

While managing access is integral to security and safety, it's equally important to ensure that a school can be evacuated quickly and safely in the event of a major incident and that unobstructed access is provided for emergency services.

Along with the physical environment, it's important to take a good look at the school's natural landscape. Factors like buildings and ground conditions need to be assessed to ensure that fences, gates and barriers are anchored on firm foundations. Given that over one-third of parents know of children leaving the site by climbing over the perimeter, it's vital to check the fence line for potential natural or man-made climbing aids, such as overhanging branches, parked vehicles or storage bins.

Second only to creating a positive learning environment, teachers revealed that keeping staff and students safe is their top priority. While there is no doubt that staff have children's best interests at heart, the research reveals some unsettling trends.

Teachers and heads are not alone, however, in their efforts to protect their pupils. By working collaboratively with architects to evaluate their site's risks and security needs, they can specify appropriate perimeter solutions that are both welcoming and protective. A better understanding of security standards and the certified or approved products available, combined with a heightened awareness of threats and vulnerabilities, can help architects deliver sound advice. Our schools, students and teachers deserve good protection. We can ensure this happens by working together ●

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