



RING THE ALARM!

Paul Fitzgerald explores evolving approaches to school security for creating safer learning environments

In today's climate, ensuring the safety of pupils and staff is a growing priority for education providers. While school leaders focus on nurturing environments for learning and development, they must also navigate an increasingly complex security landscape. From petty vandalism to high-risk emergencies, educational institutions of all types and sizes face a range of threats that require proactive, intelligent responses.

Research commissioned by education insurer Ecclesiastical reveals the scale of the challenge. Nearly 80 percent of UK schools experienced a crime in a single 12-month period, a 15 percent increase compared with the previous year. Among these incidents, 35 percent of schools were affected by antisocial behaviour, 31 percent reported graffiti and 28 percent experienced trespassing. The average

annual cost of crime to a school now exceeds £26,000. These figures highlight the scale of disruption and the importance of safeguarding the learning environment.

Security concerns span every corner of the education sector, from small village nurseries to multi-building secondary schools and sprawling university campuses. The risks include unauthorised access to premises, targeted theft of valuable equipment, after-hours vandalism and even hostile intruder scenarios that demand swift, coordinated lockdowns. These are not just isolated threats, but overlapping challenges that evolve with the institution's size, layout, location and community context.

While securing a school's perimeter and infrastructure has long been part of facilities planning, the modern approach to school security must be more comprehensive and responsive. In this context, intruder alarm systems have taken on an increasingly central

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role, not just as reactive measures but as intelligent components of an interconnected safety strategy.

A properly specified alarm system enhances safety in a number of ways. It helps deter unauthorised entry, particularly in schools with multiple entry and exit points, and provides instant alerts in the event of a breach. This enables staff to act quickly, initiating lockdown procedures if necessary and alerting emergency services in real time.

Alarm systems also serve as a visible deterrent, reducing the likelihood of criminal activity such as vandalism and theft, particularly during school holidays or overnight. In cases where incidents do occur, prompt alerts can lead to faster responses and a higher chance of apprehending offenders before serious loss or damage occurs.

Alarm systems also play an important part in helping schools comply with important safety regulations. Standards such as BS EN 50131, BS 8243, PD 6662 and PD 6669 offer guidelines for security system design and performance and incorporating certified intruder detection technology can help institutions demonstrate their commitment to pupil safety, as well as regulatory compliance.

Beyond the systems themselves, the reassurance provided to staff, students, parents and the wider community is an invaluable benefit. Security infrastructure sends a clear message that the safety and wellbeing of everyone on site is taken seriously.

For facilities managers and decision-makers, help is at hand from the Department for Education (DfE), which offers site security guidance to support schools in making informed decisions. The DfE recommends that all schools install Type A monitored alarm systems, especially those that are remote or located in areas with higher crime rates. These alarms are monitored by a central receiving centre and are capable of triggering immediate responses to breaches, offering a critical layer of resilience.

In addition, the DfE recommends that surveillance systems be capable of capturing clear facial images for identification and evidential purposes. Camera coverage should focus on entry points, IT suites, administrative areas, and circulation zones both inside and outside school buildings. The guidance also advises that equipment should be resistant to tampering and that camera performance should be supported by appropriate lighting and strategic placement, avoiding obstructions from foliage or structural features.

To further deter intruders and prevent theft or damage, schools are encouraged to consider security fogging devices, which release dense smoke upon unauthorised entry. This approach limits the intruder's visibility, making it difficult to proceed with a theft or escape undetected. The fogging system should be integrated with the alarm panel and comply with BS EN 50131-8:2019 standards. In the event of a serious threat, such as an intruder on the premises, lockdown procedures may also be required. An alarm system that allows the school to activate lockdown quickly and effectively can be instrumental in minimising harm.

Modern alarm systems offer far more than traditional sirens and sensors. Technological advances in recent years have enabled the development of smarter, interconnected security platforms that leverage broadband, 4G networks and cloud

connectivity to deliver real-time data, remote access and centralised control.

Today's systems often combine intrusion detection with access control, surveillance and automation, delivering a cohesive security infrastructure that responds dynamically to threats and day-to-day activity alike.

For school staff, the ability to monitor security events in real time, whether on-site or via smartphone, transforms how threats are managed. The latest systems support instant alerts, video verification, and full remote diagnostics, enabling facilities teams to make decisions with confidence, even when off-campus. Maintenance is also streamlined through cloud platforms that allow for remote updates and remote servicing, reducing the need for frequent site visits and associated costs. This connectivity brings other benefits too.

INVESTING IN INTELLIGENT, CONNECTED SYSTEMS IS VITAL FOR RESPONSIBLE FACILITIES MANAGEMENT

Real-time mobile alerts ensure that school leaders are instantly aware of any issues, while cloud-based storage enables secure recording and analysis of security incidents. This allows schools to track trends, identify repeat patterns of behaviour, and inform their safeguarding policies accordingly.

Emergency lockdown is one area where integration proves particularly powerful. In a hostile intruder scenario or serious threat, the ability to lock down the premises quickly and efficiently can save lives. Alarm systems can be configured to lock doors, restrict movement between zones, and send alerts to both internal teams and emergency responders in an instant. Predefined zones within the building allow staff to isolate risk areas, while integrated PA systems and mobile notifications ensure that everyone on site receives clear, timely instructions on how to respond. A well-executed lockdown system helps to eliminate confusion, enhance coordination, and potentially prevent further escalation. When supported by smart alarm infrastructure, schools can rehearse, refine and deliver their emergency plans with confidence.

For schools looking to upgrade or implement new systems, scalability is an essential consideration. No two educational institutions are the same and a system that works for one may not be suitable for another. Smaller schools may prioritise cost-effective wireless systems with straightforward app-based control, while larger campuses often require complex networks of interconnected access points, cameras and centralised monitoring stations.

Importantly, the system should also be futureproof, capable of expanding with the school's needs without requiring a complete overhaul. Scalability allows systems to evolve as the institution grows, enabling facilities managers to build on a solid foundation rather than starting from scratch when needs change.

Wireless technology is becoming increasingly prominent in this context. For schools operating

on tight budgets or housed in older buildings, wireless solutions offer a practical and non-invasive alternative to traditional cabled systems. Installation is quicker, less disruptive to the learning environment and easier to maintain. Wireless devices are highly adaptable and with fewer cables, they present fewer points of failure and lower repair costs. One significant advantage of wireless systems, particularly for older schools, is the reduced risk of disturbing asbestos during installation. Many buildings constructed before the Eighties contain asbestos in walls, ceilings and insulation. Drilling through these materials to run cables introduces serious health risks and often requires costly remediation. Wireless systems can often be installed with minimal physical intervention, preserving safety while delivering a high level of protection.

SECURITY MEASURES SEND A CLEAR MESSAGE THAT THE SAFETY OF EVERYONE IS BEING TAKEN SERIOUSLY

The value of this approach is well illustrated by a recent project undertaken at a large secondary school with a sixth form. The site comprised several buildings and required a rapid, effective lockdown solution with minimal disruption to daily operations. A traditional wired system would have been both

costly and time-consuming to install. Instead, the chosen solution involved wireless panic buttons installed strategically throughout the campus, which, when activated, triggered loud and clear sounders across all buildings and outdoor spaces.

Cloud connectivity enabled remote system control, while integration with alarm receiving centres ensured immediate escalation of alerts. The installation was completed quickly and efficiently, delivering a robust, scalable lockdown system without disrupting the school's timetable. This example highlights the importance of collaboration between schools, security installers and technology providers in delivering tailored, site-specific solutions that put safety first.

As schools face increasing scrutiny over safety and safeguarding, investing in intelligent, connected security systems has become more than just a precaution, it is an essential component of responsible facilities management.

Security technology can never replace the human element of care, vigilance and professional oversight. But it can empower staff to respond with greater speed, confidence and coordination, giving students, parents and educators the reassurance they need. Ultimately, the goal is not just to prevent crime or respond to emergencies, but to create a space where education can flourish, free from disruption and fear. In doing so, schools fulfil one of their most fundamental responsibilities: to protect the next generation and provide them with a safe place to learn, grow and thrive ●

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