

The Latest in Video Surveillance: Increasing School Security Campuswide

As Officer Collins begins one of her daily walks through the halls of the middle school where she works as a school security officer, she hears a commotion coming from the auditorium. Walking through the doors, she sees a group of students in the back row huddled around something—or someone. When one student pulls his arm back to deliver a blow, Officer Collins yells, “Stop. Freeze.” The students pause, look up, and scatter, leaving a bloodied classmate on the floor.

Officer Collins thinks she recognized some of the fleeing students, but she isn’t sure. She reaches for her radio to call the front office while hurrying to tend to the injured student. She wishes she had more information about those involved; unfortunately, the area where the incident occurred

was not covered by a video surveillance camera. And so the investigation begins.

Eye on Crime

Video surveillance cameras have been a familiar sight in schools across the country for a decade, and their use has increased over the years as concerns about school safety have risen. According to the National Center for Education Statistics’ report *Indicators of School Crime and Safety 2007*, between 1999–2000 and 2005–2006, the number of schools using one or more security cameras to monitor activities increased from 19% to 43%.

Video cameras are installed in fixed locations to help deter crime and disruption by allowing school officials to



By Bruce A. Cowdrick

monitor heavy-traffic areas of the school, such as hallways, cafeterias, and entrances. Unlike the older closed-circuit television systems, Internet Protocol cameras allow the video to be broadcast in real time not only to the school's administrative offices, but also to computers at the district office and to local police and fire departments.

Unless schools have the personnel to walk around with handheld video cameras, the more remote areas of the campus are left unmonitored.

"The presence of cameras sends a message that someone is watching and that responsible behavior is important," according to Ronald D. Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center in Westlake Village, California. "The use of cameras can also serve as a deterrent to crime. Millard Public Schools in Omaha, Nebraska, found that when they posted their campus with signs stating the campus is under 24-hour surveillance by . . . cameras, their vandalism rates decreased substantially."

The Newest in Security

The mere presence of a video camera can help deter crime, and that in itself is a significant benefit. Yet, unless schools have the personnel to walk around with handheld video cameras, the more remote areas of the campus are left unmonitored. Stephens shares the story of one Southern California school that hired a campus supervisor to simply walk around the property with a video camera.

"Another principal with whom I worked a number of years ago would keep a video camera in his office," Stephens says. "Whenever he got word that students were congregating or becoming disruptive, he would pick up the camera and begin to move toward the crowd. As he approached and raised his camera, the crowd would disperse. Sometimes he even had film in the camera."

With myriad responsibilities already resting on the shoulders of school administrators, how can school officials leverage the benefits of portable video cameras for school security without investing more time and personnel?

Enter the newest resource to help fight crime: body-worn video cameras. These cameras can be attached to a hat or helmet or wrapped around an ear to record everything the wearer sees and hears. The cameras provide line-of-sight recording, a time and date stamp, MPEG4 video files, a microphone, USB download capability, 12-hour recording capacity, and instant playback on an LCD screen. And because wearers can access even the most remote parts of

the campus, they can monitor areas not covered by mounted video cameras.

In Britain, where a national rollout of the body-mounted cameras was launched in July 2007 after a few years of pilot programs, statistics show that the cameras have decreased misconduct, decreased paperwork, and helped

provide solid evidence against criminals. Britain's Home Office reports the following statistics:

- A 14% reduction in complaints against the police
- A 22% reduction in police paperwork
- A 26% increase in violent crime arrests
- A 12% reduction in violent crime injuries.

Although they are not yet in widespread use in schools, these body-worn cameras have the potential to transfer decreased crime levels to the educational setting as well.

For example, imagine that Officer Collins has a body-worn video camera that she turns on as she begins her shift. When she hears the commotion in the auditorium, she can respond immediately without additional action on her part and the entire incident is preserved. She doesn't need to remember to activate the camera, the incident is time and date stamped, and she can focus on the incident and not on her camera equipment.

As she enters the auditorium, Officer Collins sees the students fighting near the back. As she approaches, she yells to the students. Seeing the video camera she is wearing, they pause and scatter. Now, rather than having to try to remember the names and faces of the fleeing students, she has a video record of them not only engaged in the assault but fleeing as well. She tends to the injured student, recording both the nature and extent of the injuries while asking about what happened. Again, she has a video record to back up the written report she will complete later.

How can school officials leverage the benefits of portable video cameras for school security without investing more time and personnel?

Now, the school has a video record to supplement the written record of the incident. At the end of her shift, or while preparing her written report, she downloads the video onto a computer or other storage device for archiving. This information can be used if one of the students or a student's parent challenges the written report and, if necessary, as evidence at a judicial or disciplinary proceeding. The video is archived for the necessary period, and then discarded.

"Accurately documenting crime scene evidence should help improve the quality of our juvenile justice and criminal justice systems as they attempt to resolve these matters

in our state and federal courts,” Stephens says. “Hopefully, the use of cameras will also improve the behavior of the officer and help foster a more positive and less lethal response on the part of the perpetrator or the victim.”

Legal Aspects of Video Surveillance

What are the legal implications of body-worn video cameras in schools? Schools must consider the same issues they have with stationary video camera surveillance. As Charles Russo outlined in his April 2008 article in *School Business Affairs*, with respect to any kind of video surveillance, school officials should do the following:

- Determine whether state statutes or cases would limit their ability to use this kind of technology.
- Work with their boards to determine community attitudes toward video surveillance and decide whether to establish an in-house policy committee or hire outside consultants to develop a video surveillance policy that addresses body-worn cameras.
- Ensure that written policies include clear, justifiable rationales, such as maintaining safety in areas in the absence of sufficient personnel to do so. As is the case with fixed video camera surveillance, policies should address whether tapes are to be categorized as student records and, if so, how requests for tapes, whether from parents or other interested parties, are to be handled. (See the April 2008 issue of *School Business Affairs* for a comprehensive discussion of video surveillance and the public record.)

- Ensure that policies take into account the possible privacy rights of students and other personnel—especially in areas such as locker rooms and bathrooms, where individuals may have reasonable expectations of privacy.
- Ensure that students, staff, parents, and community members are aware that body-worn surveillance cameras may be in use on school property.

“Educators should consider putting students and parents on notice by including information in student handbooks and sending letters home to parents explaining that they plan to use this technology in public areas of schools, such as hallways and cafeterias, but not in areas where there are reasonable expectations of privacy, such as bathrooms or locker rooms,” Russo suggests.

Conclusion

Video surveillance has proved time and again to deter crime, decrease vandalism, and increase the safety of students and staff. When body-worn devices are added to the security plan, officials can better monitor remote areas of campus while providing a more accurate record of incidents that can then be used, if necessary, as evidence in disciplinary proceedings. ■

Bruce A. Cowdrick is a vice-president of Innovation Motion Products, Inc. Email: admin@SegSational.com

This article originally appeared in the July/August 2008 *School Business Affairs* magazine and is reprinted with permission of the Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO). The text herein does not necessarily represent the views or policies of ASBO International, and use of this imprint does not imply any endorsement or recognition by ASBO International and its officers or affiliates.