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Keeping Students Safe

By John R. Ritter and Jonathan Fox

Broward County School District tells how an electronic visitor management system helps it keep out sex offenders and others who might endanger students.

Crimes against children, such as the 2005 abduction and murder of Jessica Lunsford in Homosassa Springs, Florida, and school shootings, such as the series of attacks that occurred in September and October, including at an Amish schoolhouse, leave no doubt about the importance of safety and security at school facilities. Administrators of Broward County's school district, headquartered in Fort Lauderdale, take that responsibility seriously.

"As the sixth-largest district in the nation, we needed to come up with a system that would protect our students and staff," numbering 271,000 and 41,000, respectively, at 264 sites, says Joseph Melita, the executive director of the district's internal police force, called the Special Investigative Unit and Professional Standards (SIU).



Manual Management

A protocol for registering and identifying all visitors—including contractors, volunteers, parents, relatives, and family friends—had long been in place at the schools. But under that system, people were tracked via handwritten entries in booklets. Each school had its own booklet where anyone registering would sign in and get some type of badge.

This paper-based approach was woefully inadequate, especially in light of new legal requirements imposed by the state. The district needed functionality for fast background checks of contractors and volunteers to comply with Florida's Jessica Lunsford Act, which was designed to protect school children against sexual predators.

Operating on a restricted budget, Melita initially proposed investing \$50,000 in an off-the-shelf visitor management software program offered by various small vendors. It was not network-based and had limited growth potential. However, district Superintendent Frank Till preferred a sustainable, multifaceted solution that could grow with the district's needs.

Education officials also wanted a wide range of other features, including the ability to search local law enforcement

databases; customize the system to identify people other than criminals who should be denied entry for specific reasons; and cross-reference students against parents and others authorized to pick up children during the school day. In addition, they wanted to be able to process visitors with a minimum of delay and inconvenience, send instant districtwide messages and alerts, and improve man-

agement of volunteers. That integration proved to be the deciding factor in selecting a provider.

A number of software companies made proposals for the visitor management system; the district went with Johnson Controls, Inc., of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, primarily because of the system's ability to allow all the schools to share information in real time. While the visitor

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agement of volunteers.

“Our unique and most critical need was for a central database able to link all the schools together,” says Reginald Browne, prevention coordinator with the district, who wrote the successful applications for the Department of Education grants for the overall safety and preparedness program. That way, a person with children at an elementary and middle school, for example, would not have to register at both schools. And anyone who one school adds to a “deny” list would au-

tomatically be on the list for all schools. management solution that the district ended up with is based on the Fast-Pass system supplied by Security Identification Systems Corporation (SISCO), of West Palm Beach, Florida, it was customized to meet the district's requirements by Johnson Controls' Fire and Security office in Weston, Florida.

How It Works

The basic system components include a computer workstation, badge printer, driver's license/document reader, bar code reader, and camera. The software works with hardware devices from any major supplier. At Broward, the software resides on servers in the central district office.

One end-user terminal is installed in each school, and building entrances are reconfigured to create a single access point, usually at a counter in the school office.

When a visitor arrives, an attendant swipes the person's identification, such as a driver's license, or a government or military ID, through a reader. The system automatically populates the database with ID information and recognizes whether the ID is properly formatted or false. The attendant who is registering the guest identifies the group to which the person belongs—parents, volunteer, vendor, or contractor. The system then checks the name against offender databases. If there is no match, a badge is printed.

If the system turns up a match with a



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listing in the offender database, the offender's picture appears on screen. This lets the attendant verify the match and avoid mistaken identity, which can occur when the system searches for a common name like John Smith.

Where a match is found, a "deny" button appears at the bottom of the screen. When an attendant mouse-clicks it, an e-mail and text message are sent automatically to the SIU, notifying personnel there that the person is at the school trying to gain entry.

Deny list. The visitor management system gives the district latitude to create its own lists of people who should be denied entry to schools. For example, volunteers are checked not only against the sexual predator lists, but also against the Broward County Clerk of Courts criminal database.

In the event of a match involving a county case, the SIU can investigate further and determine whether the matter warrants excluding the person from volunteering. The SIU can also create an internal deny list, including disgruntled former employees, those known to have caused disturbances at schools in the past, parents who do not have custodial or visiting rights, or people under restraining orders forbidding contact with a student or staff member.

If a person requesting entry is on a deny list, that person's picture will appear on-screen, with documentation on the reason for denial and instructions on actions required. If the person were to leave and try to enter another school, he or she would be identified there as well.

In addition, an attendant can instantly add a person to the districtwide deny list at his or her discretion. A candidate for the list could be a person acting violently, causing confrontation, or making threats.

Principals of the individual schools bring troublemakers to the attention of the SIU, which then decides on appropriate action. "We always try for remediation first, but if it goes beyond that, the priority is to keep the school site safe," says Melita. A letter then goes out to the violator saying they are no longer welcome on the campus.

Child pickup. Child pickup during

the school day—such as for family reasons or medical appointments—is another sensitive issue. The STAR System allows the district to keep in its database the identities and photographs of everyone authorized to pick up each child. When a person arrives to pick up a child, the system brings up the names and pictures of the people authorized to get them.

System operators can enter comments on why they released the child to a given person. An "authorized by" audit trail records who visually confirmed that the person picking up the child had permission to do so. This provides operator accountability and encourages adherence to the procedures.

Alerts. An additional benefit of the system is the ability to send messages and alerts districtwide or to specific schools. For example, administrators can send messages alerting staff to a report of a missing child, an approaching tornado or hurricane, or a serious accident on a nearby freeway.

Alerts appear on the system terminals in a box on the registration screen, which can be color-coded to indicate severity. Every workstation in the district can receive an alert within 20 to 30 seconds of the time it is created.

Supporting Volunteerism

In planning for the system, the district's volunteer coordinators saw potential for a value-added benefit in improving use of volunteers and documenting their contributions at each school.

Before the system, volunteers filled out paper applications. There were no automated background checks, and volunteer logs at the schools were kept by hand. Considering that the district deals with about 35,000 volunteers per year, that approach was clearly not optimal.

"One of the main benefits I expect from this system is quick, prompt, real-time screening of volunteers against the sexual predator database, which is required by law, and against the county clerk of courts' criminal database and our own district watch list," says Anne French, supervisor of volunteer services.

The system included development of a

comprehensive online application on which volunteers are asked to list not only their basic identifying information but also their special skills and interests and the times they are available. Once the application is submitted, all the information is recorded in the database.

Overnight, the system automatically makes the requisite background checks. The next morning, school personnel can log on to the volunteer portion of the system, see who has been approved, and notify them. Each volunteer receives a badge that is scanned into the system each time he or she enters or leaves a building. This provides a complete record of the volunteer's activity.

The volunteer database, when fully implemented, will enable school staff to search for volunteers with certain capabilities, such as fluency in languages, carpentry skills, or tutoring experience. Schools will also be able to tabulate automatically the total number of volunteer hours given at their sites. They will be able to identify volunteers who are eligible for awards based on their service hours, without having to do a hand count.

Training Initiative

Melita and Browne acknowledge that the STAR System is only as good as the people who operate it. Accordingly, the district embarked on a comprehensive training program. Administrators and school principals received high-level overviews. Then each principal selected two people from his or her school to attend comprehensive, hands-on, small-group training sessions.

To reinforce the training, the district created a training Web site that includes a training manual, training video, site preparation survey, problem resolution flow chart, and frequently asked questions.

Information technology staff members, though not responsible for the system's maintenance, were also brought up to speed to prepare them for inevitable questions from school personnel.

Implementation

The program was rolled out in a three-phase process starting in January. Initially there was one pilot school, then 14 more, then groups of nearly 60 at a time.

"We revisited after each installation,

asking what adjustments we needed to make as we move along," Browne says. "It was a learning process. We found out that staff members' ability to adapt to technology differed from school to school. Anytime you introduce a new technology, you want it to be received well. If you rush too fast, you might lose some people. You can't do it all at once."

Melita says the major adjustment was training staff to check people in electronically instead of via pen and paper. Some were gun-shy. "People don't like change, but we tell them it is a new norm," he says. "It's a new process that initially can be an inconvenience, or at least it is perceived to be. The biggest thing is getting used to the change."

The Three Cs

Browne reflects that perhaps the most difficult task in setting up the visitor management system was bringing together a novel idea and a disparate team. Many of the people who worked on this project did not know one another, he notes.

"There are three important words I would recommend using when collaborating and creating new products, procedures or concepts: Commitment, communication, and consistency," he says.

Commitment played a vital role in working through various obstacles, in dealing with contracts, and in collaborating on ideas. Communication was important because the partnership with the educational team and Johnson Controls, Inc., team required constant updates to ensure that everyone was on the same page. And finally, consistency was important to ensure that all teams stayed the course throughout the piloting process and subsequent "tweaking" phases, says Browne.

Room to Grow

While already comprehensive, the STAR System has flexibility to grow with the district's needs. For example, workstations could be easily expanded to include other hardware, such as passport readers or biometric devices. Radio frequency identification (RFID) could be applied for certain monitoring and tracking purposes.



SYNOPSIS

Broward County Public Schools, headquartered in Fort Lauderdale, has stepped up its efforts to safeguard some 271,000 students and 41,000 employees. The district applied for and received two \$500,000 grants under the U.S. Department of Education's Safe and Drug-Free Schools program. Tapping those funds and its own resources, the district has established a comprehensive safety and security program that includes disaster and emergency preparedness, staff training and education, close liaison with local police and fire departments, and a visitor management system.

The visitor management system, called the Security Tracking and Response (STAR) System enables Broward County Public Schools to quickly and effectively screen vendor and contractor personnel, volunteers, and others coming into schools. The system will enable all schools to share information in real time, so that a visitor identified as a threat by one school based on court records or other resources will be instantly identified at other schools in the district. It also lets the school keep track of anyone authorized to pick up a child.

The most difficult task in setting up the network was bringing together a novel idea and a disparate team, say those who headed the effort. The system's rollout revealed they keyed in on three vital concepts: commitment, communication, and consistency.

The system already has wireless capability. In fact, one adult education site that has its main entry in a breezeway currently uses a cart-mounted system that communicates wirelessly with the central database.

The visitor management system, which cost \$2.7 million, is part of a trend toward school districts moving progressively and collaboratively to make their facilities safer, says Browne, adding: "This was an opportunity for us to be proactive instead of reactive." ■

John R. Ritter is the South Florida Fire and Security branch manager with Johnson Controls, Inc., Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Jonathan Fox is director of sales with Security Identification Systems Corporation (SISCO), West Palm Beach, Florida.



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