

Safe School Board Meetings: Facility Considerations to Address Public School Emergency Management

Kerry Schindler
Tarleton State University
Lindsay Morgan
Tarleton State University
Heather Ortiz
Tarleton State University



**American Clearinghouse
on Educational Facilities**

August 2011

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their gratitude to several individuals, whose support and insights were invaluable in gathering information, presenting material, and shaping the final resource. These individuals, in alphabetical order, are:

Mike Brooks, CTSBO, OnSite Services: Facilities, Texas Association of School Boards

Denae Dorris, Project Manager, American Clearinghouse on Educational Facilities

Kent Howell, Pre-Trial Supervisor, Stephenville, Texas

Tom Kelley, School Safety Specialist, Texas School Safety Center

Jimmy Kennerly, School Resource Officer, Stephenville ISD

Bart McDougal, Erath County Court at Law, Stephenville, Texas

Catherine Toohey, Senior Emergency Management & Security Consultant, Texas Association of School Boards

Executive Summary

The history of school violence is long and storied. Many historical events have increased public awareness on school safety including the Bath School bombings in 1927, the Columbine School shootings in 1999, and the recent school board shooting in Florida. Therefore, it is imperative for superintendents, school board members, security directors, and facility managers in K-12 public schools to evaluate facility design elements, furnishing, and security technologies in order to determine how safety can be improved.

Safety during school board meetings should be addressed in the district's emergency management plan. Preventing violence during a school board meeting requires educational leaders to answer two questions: 1) How much security is necessary? and 2) how much freedom should be relinquished to accommodate security? These questions can be addressed by conducting a proper vulnerability assessment and developing a detailed plan of action addressing district priorities to assure the district's needs are met. Consideration of exterior and interior elements of the facility and access and egress points may improve safety at meetings.

Preparing for violence at a school board meeting involves training for multiple scenarios and maintaining emergency management plans and systems. Facility managers and security directors perform a critical function in preparing and maintaining the facility in the event of a crisis. Security technologies and facility safety elements are only effective if they are maintained properly. Emergency management table-top and training exercises are excellent ways to address potential problem areas in facility design. Through prevention and preparedness, officials can select design features, furnishing, and security technologies that are applicable to the safety needs of the district and community.

This article is intended to spark conversation between school officials concerning safety at school board meetings, in an earnest effort to prevent tragedies similar to the event on December 14, 2010 in Panama City, Florida. The article encourages school officials to 1) examine school board meeting facilities through a lens of the four phases of emergency management, 2) assess the current level of preventative elements present in the facilities through design, furnishings, and security technologies, and 3) prepare meeting facilities and school personnel through training.

This article is not intended to be an all inclusive and exhaustive list of facility elements that can be addressed to improve safety and reduce the risk of violent encounters. Also, the four phases of emergency management are used as a guide to frame the discussion of the function facilities may perform as school officials attempt to provide safe venues for meetings which engage community members. Specifically, the phases of prevention-mitigation and preparedness are particularly relevant to the discussion of addressing facility elements that may contribute to increased safety. Indeed, the discussion of facilities in the response and recovery phases of emergency management are relevant; however, for the purposes of this article, the author(s) intend to focus on facility design elements, furnishings, and security technologies which contribute to the prevention and mitigation of emergencies involving violence and how districts can prepare facilities and themselves in the event of such instances.

Safe School Board Meetings: Focusing on Facilities

PREVENTION/MITIGATION

LOW

HIGH RISK

- Maintain a fluid, school board meeting site specific emergency operations plan that includes procedures, operations, and exercises to be conducted on a regular basis.
- Provide all attendees with quick reference emergency exit and evacuation procedures should an emergency occur.
- Closely analyze and monitor meeting agenda items and gauge community pulse to ascertain if extra security measures are necessary.
- Signage is critical. Clearly post any restrictions about weapons, drugs, etc. in a visible location to meeting attendees.
- Maintain a sterile environment clear of unauthorized individuals prior to the meeting.
- Maintain facility security features and check to ensure all prevention strategies are functioning correctly.
- Provide and advertise an anonymous hotline for people to report any suspicious behavior or information about possible threats to the event or facility.
- Address design elements and furnishings which provide an appropriate level of protection for the community and local circumstances.
- Provide for law enforcement to be present at the meeting, patrol outside the meeting place, or both. The conclusion of the meeting is also a critical time for law enforcement to be present.
- Provide controlled access to the facility if allowable under local, state, and federal regulations for conducting open meetings. Require a sign-in with photo id (visitor management system).
- Do not allow attendees access to the facility with large cases, backpacks, purses, etc.
- Require attendees to pass through a walk-through or handheld metal detector to gain entrance into the facility.

PREPAREDNESS

- Maintain an open relationship and clear channel of communication with law enforcement, emergency responders, and social and mental health service agencies to promote safety during school board meetings.
- Train staff to report suspicious requests for information regarding meeting operations or facility layout.
- Train board members and staff to recognize signs of agitation, or report any suspicious behaviors or threats regarding the meeting.
- Train board members and staff to recognize a person wearing unseasonable or unusual clothing which may conceal a weapon or explosive.
- Train board members and staff on protocol for responding or evacuating the facility when emergency situations arise.

RESPONSE

- Call for assistance. Secure the area. Manage the crisis until law enforcement arrives.
- Implement the emergency management plan and other response systems (NIMS, ICS, etc.)
- Manage the immediate needs of attendees, staff, and board members.

RECOVERY

- Gather feedback. Assess response effectiveness.
- Assess facility damage and secure alternate meeting location if necessary.
- Determine short- and long-term recovery needs.
- Revise plans and procedures if necessary.
- Replenish emergency supplies.

Adapted from *Safeguarding schools against terror* by National School Safety Center, 2004.

SAFE SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS: FACILITY CONSIDERATIONS TO ADDRESS PUBLIC SCHOOL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

While school tragedies involving violent offenders are unique in many ways, these events often share one common factor, facilities. Thus, educational leaders seeking to deter school violence should evaluate the function of facilities in school safety and violence prevention. Various features of the school board facility including design, furnishings, and security technology may give support to the prevention of school violence. Preparing school board facilities and personnel for the unthinkable is a delicate balance between freedom, funding, and security. School districts must consider each of these when matters of public safety are being discussed.

School shootings throughout the past decade have forced Americans to persist in a heightened sense of awareness. School boards, educational leaders, and parents have responded to these events in a variety of ways, including the adoption of emergency procedures and modification of physical settings in which students learn. The need to expand these precautions to school board meeting spaces became apparent when a man in Florida skirted building security and held school board members hostage at gunpoint. The perpetrator eventually discharged his weapon in the direction of district officials before being accosted by school security (Lohr, 2010). In this instance, school board members were targeted during this event which received extensive online media coverage and was broadcasted over several Internet video posting websites.

What Schools Can Do

Schools may be able to prevent terrible tragedies similar to the Florida school board shooting by viewing the functionality of facilities through a lens of the four phases of emergency management (prevention-mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery). By examining school board facilities through this four phase lens of emergency management, specifically prevention-mitigation and preparedness, district officials can determine which facility modifications are needed in their communities. Educational leaders should consider low to no cost measures in security, furnishings, and facility design in order to prevent emergencies involving violence during periodic events such as school board meetings.

Prevention

Assessing the security of school board facilities should be a top priority for districts. After a vulnerability assessment has been conducted educational leaders are then presented with the questions: how much security is necessary and how much freedom should be relinquished to accommodate security? While the response of each district may differ, it is important to note that preventative actions can reduce the risk of encountering a violent crisis in the future. Planning for emergencies involving violence can save lives, prevent injury, and reduce property damage. Many experts in the security field emphasize that violent encounters cannot be entirely prevented; however, through facility design and security technologies most violent perpetrators can be deterred.

How much security is necessary? Conducting a proper vulnerability assessment should be the primary focus of school district officials seeking to identify risks associated with school board facilities. A comprehensive assessment process can pinpoint critical areas of vulnerability. A cooperative effort between school officials and community partners, while conducting the assessment, may avoid bias and provide a critical evaluation of the facilities. A properly executed assessment can help set security priorities, reaffirm district commitment to providing security, and aid in the acquisition of state and federal funding to provide needed security measures. Also, the assessment can specify a broad range of solutions designed around the specific security needs of the district. Schneider (2010) asserted, before committing funding to security technologies, schools should identify and prioritize potential security problems; then analyze solutions vigilantly to assure funds are utilized effectively in the prevention of violence throughout the facilities. Reviewing the vulnerability assessment should be a comprehensive and collaborative effort between school officials and emergency responders, including law enforcement.

How much freedom should be relinquished to accommodate security? Following a vulnerability assessment, a detailed plan of action is developed and implemented to assure district priorities are met.

Developing the action plan collaboratively with stakeholders within the district and local community emergency management professionals (law enforcement, emergency responders, and health care professionals) will most likely ensure the creation of a thorough and comprehensive plan. Community needs and district budgetary demands are examples of appropriate considerations when prioritizing security goals. Using accurate, relevant, and timely information when making decisions regarding security will help school officials develop an action plan that will address needs identified in the vulnerability assessment. The following paragraphs provide a few suggestions concerning interior and exterior prevention strategies as well as options for access control.

Exterior prevention strategies. By utilizing the principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design districts can utilize proper facility design and effective use of the built environment to deter property damage and violence. CPTED principles, when correctly utilized in facility design, can increase users' sense of security and lead to a reduction in crime. In regards to school board meeting facilities, especially those located apart from the school campus, signage and lighting provide some low cost deterrence to potential violators. High visibility signage is a quasi-proclamation of the

requirements and regulations of the facility. Installing an appropriate amount of lighting in parking lots and vulnerable access points may increase safety by dissuading perpetrators from attempting illegal activities. CPTED principles do not have to be in the original facility design, these principles can be effectively added to existing buildings.

Facility access control. CPTED, signage, and lighting address some of the prevention strategies that can be enforced before violators access the facility. In addition, examining interior building elements and access and egress points may provide additional protection. Controlling access into the facility is one critical factor to consider. Ideally, events such as school board meetings should have a single access point while maintaining multiple egress points. Simply locking doors and keeping the area sterile, clear of unauthorized individuals, prior to the meeting provides a sensible prevention solution. Access control can span the gamut of funding, from no cost to high-priced options. Unlocking a single entrance for visitors to travel freely to and from the school board meeting represents a no cost prevention method. Any decision on security measures to control access and egress must not circumvent local, state, or federal fire and life safety codes.

CPTED Principles

Natural surveillance - refers to the placement of physical features that maximize visibility.

Natural access control - involves guiding people by using signs, well-marked entrances and exits, and landscaping. It may also include limiting access to certain areas by using real or symbolic barriers.

Territoriality reinforcement - is defined by a clear delineation of space, expressions of pride or ownership, and the creation of a welcoming environment.

Physical maintenance - includes repair and general upkeep of space.

Order maintenance - involves attending to minor unacceptable acts and providing measures that clearly state acceptable behavior.

Source: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (2008).

Screening for weapons and unauthorized attendees is also critical. Installing cameras, visitor management systems, electronic turnstiles, metal detectors, and providing staff to operate these features can skyrocket prices. These security measures may be necessary depending on findings from vulnerability and threat assessments.

Districts have to decide which options work best for them and provide an adequate level of security. Various levels of prevention strategies may be necessary. Districts may have a simple visitor management system (i.e. sign-in sheets, identification check, bag inspection) during regular meetings and increase prevention strategies during meetings when a credible threat exists. Some ways to increase prevention strategies include providing for law enforcement patrol and using a handheld (wand) metal detector in conjunction with the visitor management system. The district's analysis of the vulnerability

assessment determines the level of prevention strategies necessary to provide safety during school board meetings.

Interior prevention strategies. Experts can design or renovate facilities that incorporate features capable of improving prevention strategies and deterring potential perpetrators. Design features can limit the mobility of visitors and improve the sightlines of school officials. Using free-span design features by increasing the structural integrity and reducing the need for supporting columns improves sightlines. In addition, room dimensions and design layout influence sightlines affecting the security elements of a facility. Using design features to limit the mobility of attendees can increase security. Designating locations for speakers to address school board members and designing seating arrangements that control the flow of traffic are some ways to limit the mobility of attendees.

Once visitors access the meeting facility, districts can provide added levels of prevention through furnishings. Furnishings can be selected to accommodate various levels of protection. Seating the board members on an elevated surface, constructing a barrier, or both are some design solutions that limit perpetrators' access to district officials. Advances in anti-ballistic (bullet-resistant) materials have made protecting individuals practical and more affordable. Desks constructed of Kevlar, Lexan, or carbon fiber composite materials have begun to move from the courtroom to the boardroom. Advancements in synthetic ceramic transparent armors (bullet-resistant glass) may allow designers to incorporate the thinner material into everyday facility design (American Ceramic Society, 2010). To conserve budgets, districts may limit the use of these design materials in identified high risk areas. These elements can be used in school board meeting facilities to partition board members from the general assembly and provide a shelter in the event of a tragedy similar to the shooting in Florida.

Preparedness: Training and Maintaining

Preparing for violence at a school board meeting involves training for multiple scenarios and maintaining emergency management systems. Training staff and school board members on protocols for responding or evacuating in the event of an incident or emergency is

crucial. Evacuation plans may change when access points to the facility have been limited. In most cases, additional access-controlled egress doors may serve as viable exit points.

Emergency management table-top and training exercises are an excellent way to address potential problems the facility may present during a crisis. These exercises also provide an opportunity for board members and staff to receive training regarding observational and communication techniques which are useful in identifying potential perpetrators. Maintaining an open relationship and clear channel of communication with law enforcement, emergency responders, and social and mental health service agencies will facilitate districts' preparedness in the event of violent crisis.

Training district staff to recognize and report unreasonable requests for information will alert district officials to potential perpetrators. Information regarding meeting operations or procedures that does not need to be legally or sensibly divulged to the public should remain private. Information on specific security procedures, questions regarding facility floor plans, or similar inquiries ought to be answered cautiously.

Response and Recovery

The function of the facilities in the response and recovery efforts of an incident involving a school board meeting should be similar to existing district emergency management plans. The Texas School Safety Center (2011) recommends emergency responders be provided with population descriptions and facility designs during a crisis. Also, providing emergency responders with confidential access to floor plans in advance will enhance response efforts. A liaison officer can coordinate between the district and outside agencies to ensure the interoperability and compatibility of response efforts and all types of systems (communication, software, emergency management, etc.).

During recovery efforts, protecting the scene and assessing facility damage caused by the incident may be necessary. Depending on the severity of the damage, alternate facilities may be necessary for future use. Facility damage, circumstances, and outcomes of the

crisis will necessitate the districts short-term and long-term recovery needs.

The function of facility managers and security directors. Facility managers and security directors perform a critical function in preparing the facility for a crisis. Integrating and converging technology is becoming standard in organizational security practices, especially as technologies rapidly evolve (Schneider, 2010). Consistent monitoring of these systems is necessary to ensure current information is provided. Technology loses its effectiveness when not maintained properly or updated regularly. As school board meetings typically occur in regular intervals, facility managers and security directors could use the meetings as routine dates to test and update systems.

Conclusion

Certainly, there is no current solution for schools to completely prevent an act of violence. However, school districts can minimize their potential of violence by implementing prevention strategies and preparing school facilities and personnel.

Investigating and implementing the necessary features in design, furnishings, and security technologies will help districts diminish their risk of having to respond to a violent emergency. Conducting a vulnerability assessment is one of the first steps in the investigation process. Next, establishing an action plan to be implemented will direct districts in the selection of necessary prevention design elements. Pertaining to school board meetings and facility, existing plans may be adequately adapted until a proper vulnerability assessment can be conducted. Minor modifications or renovations may be necessary to improve meeting facilities, giving users major benefits in deterring potential perpetrators. Finally, training is necessary to prepare school board members and staff to maximize the benefits of improved security technologies, furnishings, and facility design.

Though school board shootings may be rare, in the larger context of public meetings, shootings and

violence are a viable threat. Thoughtful considerations must be given to local needs before committing funds to major projects related to securing meeting facilities. Conducting a vulnerability assessment and developing plans that are appropriate and applicable to the community will ensure districts provide optimal levels of safety while spending funds wisely.

References

- American Ceramic Society. (2010, September 17). *Ceramic spinal transparent armor* [Video of the Week]. Retrieved from <http://ceramics.org/ceramictechtoday/military/video-of-the-week-ceramic-spinel-transparent-armor/>
- Lohr, D. (2010, December 15). Police: Florida school board gunman planned attack. *AOLNews*. Retrieved from <http://www.aolnews.com/2010/12/15/police-florida-school-board-gunman-had-planned-attack/>
- National School Safety Center. (2004). *Safeguarding schools against terror*. Retrieved from <http://www.schoolsafety.us/free-resources>
- Schneider, T. (2010). *School security technologies*. National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities. Retrieved from http://www.ncef.org/pubs/security_technologies.pdf
- Texas School Safety Center. (2011, March 9). *Emergency management*. [Website Page] Retrieved from <http://www.txssc.txstate.edu/K12/emer-mgmt/>
- National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (2008, June 23). Using Environmental Design to Prevent School Violence [Website Page]. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/cpted.htm>

Web Resources and Tools: Safe School Board Meetings

American Clearinghouse on Educational Facilities www.acefacilities.org

- **Vulnerability Assessment:** Educational Facilities Vulnerability/Hazard Checklist
<http://www.acefacilities.org/Resources/documents/ACEF%20-Vulnerability-Hazard%20Assessment%20Checklist.pdf>
- **Webinar:** The Vulnerability Assessment Process
<http://www.acefacilities.org/DistanceLearning.aspx?page=e7e00bb5-ab53-47e0-90ae-13d73798e01d>

CPTED Security www.cptedsecurity.com

- **Guidelines:** CPTED Design Guidelines
http://www.cptedsecurity.com/cpted_design_guidelines.htm

CPTED Design Principal – Singapore National Crime Prevention Council

- **Guidebook:** <http://www.ncpc.gov.sg/pdf/CPTED%20Guidebook.pdf>

Federal Emergency Management Agency <http://www.fema.gov/index.shtm>

- **Review Material:** Incident Command System (ICS)
<http://www.training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/ICSResource/assets/reviewMaterials.pdf>
- **Checklists:** ICS Position Checklist
<http://www.training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/ICSResource/PositionChecklists.htm>
- **Resource Center:** ICS Resources
<http://www.training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/ICSResource/ReferenceDocuments.htm>
- **Resource Center:** National Incident Management System (NIMS)
<http://www.fema.gov/emergency/nims/>
- **Worksheets:** Plan & Prepare for a disaster
<http://www.fema.gov/plan/determine.shtm>

Marsh <http://global.marsh.com/>

- **Webinar:** Workplace Violence Prevention, Response, and Recovery
<https://marsh.webex.com/marsh/lsr.php?AT=pb&SP=EC&rID=37573922&rKey=c69156a2f556fb97>

National Institute of Justice <http://www.nij.gov/welcome.html>

- **Guide:** The Appropriate and Effective Use of Security Technologies in U.S. Schools
<http://www.nij.gov/pubs-sum/178265.htm>

National School Safety Center www.schoolsafety.us

- **Statistics:** NSSC Review of School Safety Research
<http://www.schoolsafety.us/media-resources/school-crime-and-violence-statistics>

School Planning and Management www.peterli.com/spm/

- **Webinar:** School Safety Solutions: Think Outside the Box and Stay Inside the Budget in 2010
<http://event.on24.com/eventRegistration/EventLobbyServlet?target=lobby.jsp&eventid=197292&sessionid=1&key=02A980C9846F5498B4A6708E16285C24&eventuserid=44292048>

Texas School Safety Center www.txssc.txstate.edu

- **Manual:** Security Design Criteria Manual for Schools
<http://www.txssc.txstate.edu/media/K12/popups/txssc-popup-design-criteria>

Web Resources and Tools: Safe School Board Meetings (cont.)

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools www.ed.gov

- **Guide:** Practical Information of Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities.
<http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/crisisplanning.pdf>
- **PowerPoint:** School Safety and Physical Design
[http://www.osdfsnationalconference.com/Presentations/63.%20School%20Safety%20and%20Physical%20Design%20\(Steve%20Harris\).pdf](http://www.osdfsnationalconference.com/Presentations/63.%20School%20Safety%20and%20Physical%20Design%20(Steve%20Harris).pdf)

Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control <http://www.cdc.gov/>

- **Review:** Using Environmental Design to Prevent School Violence
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/cpted.htm>

U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/>

- **Guide:** The Appropriate and Effective Use of Security Technologies in U.S. Schools
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/pubs-sum/178265.htm>
- **Brochure:** Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design and Community Policing
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/pubs-sum/157308.htm>