

Are Your Students Safe in School?

Schools and colleges acting 'in loco parentis' when children are in their care is underlined by the new statutory guidance documents published by the Department for Education (DfE) in September 2019. These set out the legal duties schools and colleges must follow when carrying out their responsibilities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.



While these guidelines addressed the social, criminal and online risks children face, there is little mention of ensuring the physical safety of

children should an emergency arise on school or college premises that requires lockdown. In 2018, in association with GUK, the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) published a document that provides guidelines for school lockdown⁽¹⁾. Following this, the DfE launched a consultation in November 2018⁽²⁾ to seek views from head teachers, teachers, other school staff and governing boards aimed at putting together a comprehensive national plan for school lockdown procedures, but to date nothing has been published.

So in what circumstances could a school instigate a lockdown procedure?

Data recorded by the Metropolitan Police Service for a 12-month period up to May 2019 includes 291 instances of suspects armed with a knife on school grounds, 21 instances of gun possession, 37 reported rapes, 232 drug offences and 3,500 reports of violence. However, incidents that risk the safety of children in schools extends well outside the M25.

Polesworth school in Warwickshire went into lockdown when intruders were reported on site, and a Sheffield school went into lockdown after a boy was chased into the school by a group of other youths. Pupils were forced to 'hide under tables' when Stuart Bathurst Catholic High School Form in Birmingham was locked down twice after reports of three intruders on site. West Kent College in Tonbridge went in to lockdown amid reports a man was brandishing a

wood axe in the car park, as did a school in Angus after an excluded pupil returned to the campus for the second time wielding a knife.

It's not just incidents on school premises which can instigate a lockdown either; nearby events can also present a threat to pupil and staff safety. Tabor Academy in Braintree was reportedly



put into lockdown as a number of armed police officers responded to an incident in a nearby estate. A Plumstead school went into lockdown after a pupil was stabbed at a nearby bus stop. Police advised a Manchester school to go into lockdown when they launched a manhunt in the area following a serious assault, and a school in West Derbyshire locked down after a man

was found shot dead in a nearby field.

And it's not only instances of intruders or violence that can trigger a lockdown. Gordon's School in Woking went into lockdown as a precautionary measure following police advice as emergency services dealt with unknown chemical spill nearby.

The concerning factor is that these are just some of the reported incidents which occurred during a four month period between September and December 2019. This suggests it is incumbent on all schools to have lockdown procedures in place should a situation arise that puts the safety of students and staff at risk.

All schools have alarms and procedures in place in the event of a fire. However, an intruder entering the premises, or a major disturbance occurring in the nearby community which potentially puts the school at risk, is a totally different situation requiring specific protocols. Some LEAs have formal lockdown procedures in place and some schools actually carry out lockdown drills, but this is not universal.



During 2019, Prestatyn High School rehearsed a lockdown procedure after all schools were advised by the Welsh Government to put in place arrangements for a lockdown to protect

pupils and staff in the event of incidents such as the threat of terrorist action, an intruder on the school site or civil disturbance in the local community. Students of Forest School near Wokingham had to hide under tables while doors were barricaded as they practised a school lockdown drill, and Bicton College students enacted a realistic lockdown scenario where armed police officers performed an operation to search for and detain a potential intruder on the premises.

Whether an emergency requires evacuation or lockdown, it is essential that clear information is communicated quickly throughout the school. By law, schools must have a working fire bell or alarm fitted. However, while a bell can provide an audible indication that an emergency situation has arisen, it doesn't differentiate between evacuation or lockdown, let alone a partial or full lockdown situation. Using an existing fire alarm to indicate a lockdown can cause confusion amongst students and staff, and actually goes against current government guidance from NaCTSO (National Counter Terrorism Security Office). The last thing any school wants is pupils streaming out onto a playground to assembly points when there is a possible violent intruder on the premises. Numerous schools also use the same fire bells to announce class changes, but this can cause further confusion and potentially cost precious time before staff and pupils realise a real emergency requiring immediate action is occurring rather than just a class change.

Many schools have solved the issue of concise communication by installing an integrated public address, class change and emergency alarm system such as Bodet's Harmonys. This stores a range of different tones, melodies and pre-recorded voice messages. Not only can these be used to announce routine class changes, lunch or end of school, but should an emergency situation occur, alarms for evacuation or lockdown can be broadcast immediately across the whole site. These emergency alerts can also be triggered from wired control boxes, remote controls or even smartphones so staff and pupils know exactly what's happening and what to do.



As well as clear announcements, regular practices should be conducted so that all staff and pupils are familiar with the actions they should take should an emergency occur. This not only avoids confusion, but the time saved could mean the difference between successful outcome or tragedy.

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- (1) <https://www.naswt.org.uk/advice/health-safety/school-lockdown-procedures.html>
- (2) https://consult.education.gov.uk/teacher-regulation-safer-recruitment/non-statutory-school-security-guidance/supporting_documents/School%20security%20consultation%20document.pdf