Are Your Staff and Students Ready for Lockdown?

One hundred and thirty schools went into lockdown in one month alone because of a perceived threat to the students according to a BBC report[1]. Admittedly this was in the USA, where 50 school shootings are reported annually, but UK schools have also experienced a growing trend for violent attacks on staff and students.

In 2015, there were reports of such incidents not only in Southfields[2], and Dulwich[3] in London, but as widespread as Leeds[4] and Bradford[5] in the North and Dorset[6] and Somerset[7] in the South. As well as direct attacks on school property there are growing concerns over other incidents that potentially put staff and students at risk. A shooting outside a Liverpool school[8], a man wielding a gun outside a Cambridge school[9], a secure unit abscondee on the loose in Conwy[10] and armed raiders running into a school after a robbery[11], all resulted in schools going into lockdown.

Schools have long been prepared for evacuation procedures such as fire, or gas leaks. Fire alarms are standard and fire drills practiced to minimise the risk to staff and students. Students know to evacuate immediately for their own safety and assemble at an agreed point so numbers can be accounted and the right action taken by the emergency services.

However, an intruder entering the premises, or a major local disturbance occurring in the community which potentially puts the school at risk, is a totally different situation and the school should immediately go into lockdown to minimise the risk to staff and children. But is it a major threat such as an armed intruder requiring a full lockdown or a reduced threat like a local off-site disturbance which only requires a partial lockdown? Many LEAs have formal lockdown procedures[12] which explain the actions required in different threat situations.

Whether an emergency requires evacuation or lockdown, it is essential that accurate information is communicated clearly and quickly throughout the school. By law schools must have a working fire alarm fitted, which traditionally is a bell system. In many schools the same fire bells are also used to announce class changes, which can cause further confusion and lose precious time before staff and pupils realise it's not just the end of class but a real emergency.

While a bell can give a resounding announcement that an emergency situation has arisen, it doesn't differentiate between evacuation or lockdown, let alone a partial or full lockdown situation. 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. Some schools have installed integrated class change and PA systems such as Bodet's Harmonys which store a range of different tones, melodies or pre-recorded voice messages. These can be programmed for routine class change, lunch or end of school announcements but in an emergency, specific alarms can be broadcast across the site so staff and pupils know immediately what's happening and what action they need to take.

Schools have a duty of care to both staff and students, so there should not only be effective systems and procedures in place, but regular practices should be conducted so that all staff and pupils know what to do in any situation. This not only avoids confusion, but the time saved could mean the difference between successful outcome or tragedy

The recent school shootings in Canada[13] and Sweden[14], and the bomb threats to schools in Australia[15] underlines the growth and nature of potential attacks on schools on a global scale. There is little schools can do to prevent such random attacks or threats, but having clear and effective communication systems installed, robust lockdown and evacuation procedures and regular practices conducted, we can ensure we are doing all we can to ensure the safety of staff and students.

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