



PALM BEACH COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT PROTECTING THE MOST ASSETS, ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Jim Kelly, chief of the Palm Beach County (Fla.) School District Police Department, has spent many a sleepless night worrying about the children under his protection. "We've put forth a lot of effort to protect our airports and utilities, but comparatively little attention has been paid to protecting our most valuable — and vulnerable — assets, our elementary schools," he says. He turned to technology to get results.

The school district is the nation's 11th largest, with more than 185 facilities responsible for over 170,000 K-12 students, plus 21,000+ teachers and administrative staff. Sixteen departments help run the school and county government entities.

The first part of Kelly's job is securing a budget, which is divided among police staffing and systems, such as access control, video, intrusion alarms, and other physical security measures. "We've always had to battle for the money we needed because anything we purchased was seen as taking away from direct, instructional purposes," says Ron Plucinski, security systems manager for the PBCSD Police Department.

Kelly and his team continuously investigate new technologies that will make the best use of their personnel and budgetary resources. "Non-instructional personnel are hard to come by," Plucinski explains, "so we are always looking at technology that will make better use of our existing staff."

One of the ongoing budgetary drains that Kelly and his team have eliminated is re-keying costs. Various school faculty or staff will be assigned a "master" key that can open any of the doors within a particular school. "A lost key previously cost us between \$10,000 and \$20,000 to re-key a school," Kelly says.

The solution came in the form of an electronic access control system developed by G4S Technology. G4S's Symmetry Enterprise system, using HID proximity cards instead of keys,

enables the security department to grant staff members variable access to school facilities. If a person loses their card, they are simply issued a new one, while the access privileges associated with their lost card are deleted from the cardholder database, thus there is no need to change locks and issue new keys.

Beyond saving money, Symmetry Enterprise delivers enhanced security without adding headcount or disrupting the teaching environment. "The access control system functions like a transparent gatekeeper," Plucinski says. "Just a few years ago, almost anyone could walk onto a public school campus. But all that has changed now, and access control technology helps us negotiate our access and safety priorities."

The system is centrally monitored and controlled. Technicians from the district's security department have equipped each of the districts over 185-plus facilities with access control systems. Over 40 schools have been completed to date, with each school using a variable number of Symmetry multiNODE controller panels to talk to the 2,500 HID proximity readers and door hardware installed at critical entrance points. One of the panels functions as a parent to the other panels and connects over the district's wide-area network (WAN) to upload transactional data and download modifications to the cardholder database administrated at the district headquarters. Two client workstations reside at the headquarters — one is used to issue visitor badges to the high volume of traffic that flows into and out of the headquarters each day, and the other is located within the police department and handles most of the district's photo-ID badging services. The entire system, including the dozens of schools currently online manages approximately 21,000 cardholders (only for staff).



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Another innovation relates to providing after-hours access to faculty and staff. The typical solution would be to install a telephone outside the main door(s) with a direct line to a central dispatch station. The problem with that arrangement is that anyone can pick up the phone and call the dispatch center, which must then try to authenticate the person's identity. To solve this problem, Plucinski has replaced the telephone with an HID reader and intercom. When a faculty or staff member wants access, they present their card to the proximity reader, which triggers the intercom to dial the dispatch center. This ensures that only valid cardholders can submit their requests for access, eliminating any erroneous calls and the possible malicious intentions that motivate them.

Another critical component of the school district's security system is video surveillance. Schools outfitted with video surveillance capabilities will typically have between 15 and 30 cameras per campus, depending on the layout of the facility. At the district's elementary schools, where delinquency is less of a problem than at the middle and high schools, the responsibility of monitoring the cameras is an ancillary function of the school's clerical staff. Web-based monitoring through a browser interface is provided to elementary school principals and police staff. In middle- and high school situations, the administration will rotate daily monitoring responsibilities to faculty or staff members. This ensures adequate surveillance without needing to add anyone to the payroll. All of the cameras can be monitored over the WAN at the district headquarters.

Kelly maintains a forward looking perspective in discovering new ways to make the district and its students safer and more confident in the security of their surroundings. To ensure that the investments he is making today will enable him to take advantage of the technology advances of tomorrow, Kelly demands that any electronic security system his department acquires uses industry-standard, nonproprietary components. The selection of the Symmetry access control system is one good example of this commitment. “We are not only looking at the G4S system to provide security but also a platform we can build on,” Kelly says. Some examples of Kelly's access control integration plans:

- Biometric readers in the classroom to automate taking attendance;
- Biometric readers on school buses to better track students while in the care of the schools;
- Smart cards for cafeteria or vending purchases and library transactions;
- Time and attendance capabilities to staff payroll; and
- Classroom intercom and panic buttons for teachers.

One advantage to this kind of interdepartmental integration is that the departments can pool their budgets to acquire systems they would not individually be able to afford. “The more areas a piece of technology can address, the more attractive and affordable it is,” Kelly says.

He also hopes that the discoveries and solutions he and his team had made will benefit his peers in school districts nationwide. “All schools have the same issues,” Kelly continues. “Our hope is that districts that may not have the financial resources we do will be able to take what we have learned and apply it in their particular situations.”



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