

ASPECTS OF SCHOOL SECURITY
by
Roscoe Thompson, School Security Specialist

School security is a lot more than just physical security. It is a public relations job which includes quite a number of different jobs. There is security of grounds, premises and people. Mediation is another component. Student to student, staff to student, nonstudent to student; are all possible scenarios for mediation. Counseling by exhibiting and talking about life skills and life styles with kids. Kids watch and learn from adults whether the lessons are good or bad.

We must be good report writers. A well documented report that is legible and coherent is a basic element to good security work. Be able to engage with staff, students and visitors in a respectful and helpful way while at the same time trying to gain information when needed. Have a sympathetic ear when students or staffs just want someone to talk to.

A good security specialist will try to anticipate trouble areas and try to head off any problems. This is not always possible due to the many personalities, attitudes and backgrounds of the people we will come in contact with. It is not all muscle in school security. A very small percentage of time is spent breaking up fights. If you are breaking up fights daily, every other day or the same people are fighting over and over again then the discipline and admittance policy of that school or district needs to be re-examined.

Good security and safety is dependent on every staff member doing a part in the overall operation of the building. Safety and security in a school setting is not the same as police work although it encompasses some of the elements of that line of work. It is not the same as traditional security guard work but some of those duties are in school security work. A good security specialist should be able to change roles at a moments notice depending on what the situation calls for. We are constantly called for classroom management issues by teachers. An unruly student or students disrupting the learning process inside a specific classroom is initially handled by the security specialist. Some teachers are not trained or equipped to handle that kind of problem or choose not to deal with the situation for any number of reasons. Instead of conflicting with the staff about who handles a situation like that a good security specialist will try and handle the situation or conflict with the least disruption to the learning process. We must de-escalate the conflict as quickly as possible which usually means removing and isolating the persons from each other and the scene of the disturbance.

Security specialists and the building administration must have a cohesive and coordinated working relationship because the educational component and the safety and security element help determine that schools ability and commitment to educate kids for the future. The environment that the students and staff perceive as safe and secure, aids in the learning process. Parents and other visitors to the school will also notice the climate at the school. Security specialists have to be a liaison or central figure between students, staff and visitors. Specialists must identify the areas in the school where students

congregate, the entrances, exits and approximately how many students use each entrance and the most likely points for intruders. Talk to the staff individually between classes and when you see them in the hallway. Cultivating work relationships with staff enhances the flow of information. The staff would like to feel that they play a role in the shaping of the climate in their school. They do and they should be acknowledged and listened to. The building leadership team, discipline committee, instructional council, department heads and other groups should be made aware of and be a part of safety and security measures in their buildings.

A safe and secure school is everybody's job. Engage students in conversation. Be there to greet them on their arrival in the morning. A good morning or hello goes a long way in establishing a dialogue with some students. Let them know that you are there to help them if you can but you will not lie for them. Some students try to use a staff member's kindness as a way to break the rules and get the staff member to condone it. Let them know that everyone makes mistakes and that is alright sometimes. They must be taught that making the same mistake over and over again is not alright after they have been corrected and told of the consequences. Being more of a role model and mentor is part of the socialization kids need to become productive adults in society. As stated earlier we must model the behavior and talk we want kids to adopt.

We must remember that some administration and staff have different views and aspirations from building to building and from staff member to staff member in a particular school. We as security personnel have to be aware of these situations. We can affect these building dynamics by the tone and content of the conversations we have with staff members. Some staff and students do not help to promote and advance a safe and secure learning environment. We must identify these individuals and find a workable solution to these problems. Some staff are afraid of some kids, some do not care if students learn, it may be just a paycheck for some staff, some have no stake or interest in the community and some may just be poor teachers who cannot do the job. There are some students who do not come to school to learn even when they are capable of learning. They disrupt classrooms and other school functions. Sometimes this is corrected with a parent, staff, student conference to discuss what is expected of the student, staff and parent as far as the educational process and behavior of that student is concerned. A key element is getting the parents or guardian involved. Some parents feel that their child can do no wrong and the school is just picking on their student. When this is clearly not the case the parent and the student need to be told that with or without the parents approval their student will not be allowed to disrupt the educational process and jeopardize the safety and security of that school. We work with the student and parent to get the troubled student on a disciplined path that will benefit the student and make the parents proud. We must get the parents involved in their child's education because they can contribute an influence on the child that staff members can not. We can not and must not let a few disruptive people keep other people from learning. The school and the district need to be committed to this idea. The parent, student and certain advocates will say that we cannot deny a student the right to an education. I agree with that philosophy but when we have a student who is at school disrupting activities and not learning anything then we are not denying that student an education. That student is denying

themselves and possibly others the chance to learn. If the student is not capable of learning in that setting that needs to be addressed. If a student is able and refuses to learn and decides to disrupt then that needs to be identified and taken care of as soon as possible. No one has a right to disrupt a safe and secure learning environment and when it happens it must be addressed with all haste and due process.

Not everyone can do school security work effectively. Some people come into school security not realizing that you are expected to be one of the main problem solvers. That problem may have nothing to do with the official job description. Most police officers say that they could not do school security work and would not do it because of the limitations placed on security specialists. Security specialists usually have a two way radio and their mouth to work through the day to day interactions we come in contact with. Security personnel in some districts carry no weapons and have no arrest powers. One of the intangible things you must have is what is called “the gift of gab”. Talking through a situation is our biggest asset. When a conflict between individuals or groups can be worked out through conversation and compromise that usually translates into a win-win situation for everyone involved. Some police do not have the patience and training to do conflict resolution with a student population. Their focus and training is mainly law enforcement which could mean anything from warnings and citations to deadly force. Police training does not include school security. Police academies are not designed to train school security officers.

The different motivations of staff members can divide a school and sabotage the vision and mission of that school. The students are the people who suffer. The first priority is to work toward providing the best education possible. Some district employees pay lip service to that premise but in reality that is not what happens. At the building level some schools under report incidents of misbehavior and violence. At the central administration level some people know very little about what happens in the schools. They may not know where schools are located but they may ride around in district cars and burn gas. They might have an office where they never answer the phone and draw a pay check. These people use the district as their cash cow and sometimes go unchecked. We as security specialists need to be aware of all these dynamics in order to be as effective as possible. Security specialists come in contact with all the students, staff and most visitors. We are a part of countless interactions daily. We can and do play a significant role in what the school climate will be now and in the future. Our attitude, demeanor, appearance, motivation and professionalism are always on display. Our school is a community and security specialists are the guardians and caretakers. Our ethics, trustworthiness and credibility should be above reproach because we are always in the public eye and the job we do is always being evaluated by students, staff, management and our peers.