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School Emergency Communications Save Lives: 7 Best Practices to Follow

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It's imperative for schools to have effective emergency communications. These best practices will help speed up response times by police, fire, EMS, and campus staff.

When a safety or security incident happens at school, details about the emergency and its location must be immediately communicated to first responders, the campus security team, and/or other school staff. Doing so helps ensure these responders have the personnel and resources they need to effectively address the specific issue the campus is experiencing.

The right emergency communications system, policies and procedures can help your organization quickly respond to a wide range of crises. These include but aren't limited to natural disasters, weather emergencies, fires, disgruntled visitors, fights, noncustodial parent issues, students acting out, facility operations issues, medical emergencies, active shooters, and bomb threats.

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Alyssa's Law Mandates Schools Adopt Panic Alarms

The value of emergency communications on K-12 campuses is so important that **Alyssa's Law** has been adopted in several states, including New Jersey, Florida, New York, Texas, Tennessee, Utah, and Oklahoma. Many other states, including Nebraska, Arizona, Virginia, Oregon, Georgia, Michigan, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Alabama, are considering passage of this legislation.

Alyssa's Law was named in honor of 14-year-old Alyssa Alhadeff, who was a victim of the 2018 active shooter attack at **Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School** in Parkland, Fla., that killed 17 people and injured 17 others. Alyssa's Law requires schools to have panic alarms that directly link to law enforcement so they can quickly respond to an emergency on campus. It also requires panic alarms be strategically placed throughout a K-12 campus, are integrated with a comprehensive emergency response plan, and more.

Many U.S. school districts have already adopted some type of panic alarm system. According to the **2023 Campus Safety Panic Alarm and Mobile Duress System/ App Survey**, the top ten emergencies when panic alarms are most often activated are:

1. Medical emergencies
2. Active shooters
3. Students acting out
4. Someone with a weapon

5. Fights
6. Unauthorized visitors/intruders
7. Weather emergencies
8. Threats made by students
9. Visitors acting out
10. Parents acting out/Noncustodial parent issues

Traditional Emergency Communications Systems Have Limitations

The adoption of panic alarms by a school district is a significant safety and security improvement. However, traditional panic alarms can only do so much. Fixed panic alarms, which are the most common duress technologies installed on campuses, can't be carried by teachers as they walk around class. This limits their ability to quickly (and discreetly) press a panic button during a crisis. Additionally, traditional panic buttons generally only allow for one-way communications with no means for acknowledgement or response.

It should be noted that traditional panic alarms aren't the only method of communication that can pose challenges. School districts often discover after an incident that their overall communications systems and plans don't perform as they had expected. Radio failures may cause communication delays and confusion; 911 call routing problems may impede response; students and staff members might not be able to hear PA announcements. With other technologies that rely on staff cell phones, some

teachers may turn off their phones during class or when they are grading papers. For communications sent to employee laptops, these staff members might not receive messages if they are away from their computers or their laptops are turned off.

Additionally, the "cry wolf" syndrome can be an issue with some technologies that don't differentiate between active shooter alerts and frequently-sent but less-critical alerts. When this happens, staff members might not respond to active shooter alerts with appropriate urgency.

A communication device is most effective during a crisis if it's with the user wherever they are on campus, the device is turned on, and the device has two-way voice communications capabilities. Additionally, notifications are of use only if they are accurate and meaningful to recipients.

What to Look for In a School Emergency Communications System

Fortunately, recent technological advancements address many of these challenges. The following seven recommended practices and features will help ensure your school's communications program is effective.

1. Adopt a panic alarm with two-way voice communications and in-building location dispatchable capabilities.
Schools should adopt a system that functions like a portable panic button but can also receive voice communications. For example, when the button is pressed on the device, it should discreetly open a communication channel that broadcasts your voice to an on-campus response team, with an open mic. The team can see the staff member's name and location and hear what's happening. The team can then -- if necessary and/or appropriate -- communicate directly with the staff member who requested assistance.

> **A communication device is most effective during a crisis if it's with the user wherever they are on campus, the device is turned on, and the device has two-way communications capabilities.**

2. The panic button/device is lightweight, easy to access, and easy to use. If a communications device is easy to carry, teachers and staff members will be much more likely to always carry their devices with them when they are at school. Additionally, if the system is user-friendly and intuitive, new employees and even substitute teachers will have the ability to call for help during an emergency as well as receive notifications.

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3. The device can broadcast to a group or everyone on campus. This feature enables users to communicate with select individuals or a selected group of individuals, which limits classroom disruptions and recipient message fatigue in those who don't need to be included in a non-emergency notifications.

4. Teachers and staff members can use the device to directly call 911, and security supervisors can contact school resource officers directly. This feature helps speed up the response time of police, fire, and EMS.

5. The device can be used for day-to-day communications. Emergency communications systems shouldn't just be used during a crisis. A school should select a technology that can be used by school staff for everyday situations, such as notifying campus custodians about maintenance issues, alerting school staff when the buses are running late, when a student needs to go to the nurse's office, parent-teacher conferences, and a whole host of other issues related to general campus operations. Frequent use of a communications technology ensures staff will know how to use the system during an emergency. It also bolsters the district's return on investment (ROI) because it is improving the efficiency of campus operations.

6. The system should provide a real-time directory view of teachers, administrators, and SROs, even across multiple campuses. A real-time directory enables districts to effectively and efficiently deploy resources and security personnel to multiple campus locations across the city or country.

7. The device integrates with other technologies on campus, such as video surveillance, access control, building maintenance systems, intrusion alarm systems, and more. For example, if the panic alarm device is integrated with a campus access control system, when a door is propped open at a time when it shouldn't be, the access control system can send a "door unlocked" notification to the SRO or security team, enabling them to take quick action to close the door.

> **Emergency communications systems shouldn't just be used during a crisis.**

Invest in Technology that Supports your Policies and Procedures

In addition to these features, it's critical for a school to adopt policies to support the communications technology that is adopted.

This should include defining the individuals who will be communicating and who will be receiving the information that is transmitted. Those people could be administrators, teachers, custodians, bus drivers, cooks, and, of course, first responders.

It's also important to define the kinds of messages that will be transmitted and which type of person or group should receive those messages.

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