School Security Spending: When is Too Much?

As a new school year starts there is a stream of reporting about how much money is being spent on more equipment. There is a problem with this: Cost is not a good indicator for the effectiveness of a security or safety program. Cameras, a favorite of security hardware vendors, are expensive and do little to prevent incidents; they are great for post incident investigations and help on access control but are limited. Other items like bullet proof glass are over the top. While there seems to be a glut of money for security spending this will pass and large expenditures for replacing and updating these systems will end up coming out of school operating budgets. I've seen this with Homeland Security grants a number of times...get "free" money for exotic systems then not have the budget for maintenance and replacement.

My suggestion is rather than measuring security in dollars spent we should be measuring it in numbers of teachers, staff and responders trained. I am not advocating arming teachers, rather giving them the tools they need to prevent and better respond to security (and medical or safety) incidents through awareness and communications.

Here are a few things to consider:

1. Do teachers and staff get formal training on security incidents (such as what to do in a lock-down)?
2. Do teachers have the ability to detect and report (discreetly) suspicious activity?
3. Do teachers have the ability to rapidly request emergency assistance for medical or security emergencies with the push of a button? (on-site and off-site)
4. Do teachers get status reports during lockdowns and other emergencies? (What's happening, why the emergency, where to go if evacuating, etc.)
5. Can teachers provide responders real time situation reports from inside a locked down school?
6. Can administrators and responders quickly identify the precise location of a problem in a school using a floor plan display?
7. Can administrators and responders send updates and status reports to those locked down?

There are a number of products and training programs that enhance awareness and response without breaking the bank or creating long term liabilities. Smartphone based systems like I'm Safe for Schools provide a means for teacher and staff to be active participants in security programs, training programs can also give teachers and responders tools that can enhance security.

Before you make an investment of hundreds of thousands of dollars on a security program ask whether the widget you want to buy is really better than a well trained staff member with training and the ability to communicate during an emergency. What's a better sensor, a person or a camera? Some hardware solutions are needed, but people are our best asset for reducing risk, make sure they are part of the plan.