
The inadequacies of some School Lockdown Solutions.

The good, the bad and the downright dangerous

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There is a general call for schools to adopt a Lockdown policy of some kind and there is a lot of information now on the web and from local Councils on how a school can create and adopt a policy, but there appears to be a big hole left by these recommendations regarding how the school tells staff around their sites.

Some of these guidelines refer to “an alarm should be used”. Some even seem to consider that email is an effective method, in this paper we look at the adequacy of these solutions and how it might be done more effectively.

With our years of experience in emergency call systems I can see a lot of problems with this vague approach and lack of clarification and in some cases what I consider to be poor or dangerous suggestions. I've also noticed a large increase in questions on forums relating to what is a satisfactory way of communicating around a large school or education site in a state of emergency or lockdown.

Whilst something basic may well suit a small perhaps rural school, when it comes to sprawling education sites some of these just don't cut the mustard and in fact lead to ambiguity and risk.

So what are the options being discussed...

Using fire alarms or similar

This appears to be the most obvious solution but could be fraught with problems. Trying to get the existing fire alarm to provide a second or third sound type or an intruder alarm to signal seem to be popular, but these are inadequate for many applications.

As many schools already use the fire alarm for break time indication, the site would be already using 2 sounds from the same system. Introducing more sounds that staff should try to remember and work out which is which means risk of incorrect procedures being adopted or delays in them being actioned.

The question of whether such a system can provide differentiation between full and partial lock down also raises its head to add further complexity.

In addition, sounds of loud alarm around a site can cause unnecessary and dangerous concern and panic of pupils, and possibly escalation of the threat itself. Pupils without teacher supervision could also misinterpret these sounds and roam into the incident area.

Imagine the circumstance of an unknown person on site. The common procedures of approach and de-escalation through direct initial contact may be actioned, perhaps in tandem with notification to all staff of an impending incident and to standby for further instruction.

The use of a fire alarm or site wide sounding alarm is not suitable for this application, there would be no way of discreetly advising other staff of a potential issue. Indeed, the sound of the alarms being activated may indeed put those assessing the situation at risk and possible escalate the threat quicker.

Consider too the potential of an attack or incident that has triggered the fire alarm leaving no ability to communicate anything further, leaving all staff and pupils exiting the buildings right into the middle of an incident!

So should you completely discount the fire alarm route then?

Not completely but with reservation and as a potential last resort. If the site is fairly small and there is only one sound currently in use then this could provide the total lockdown level of call. Should the site need anything more or are already using the fire alarm for other sound indications, then this is not likely to be the solution

Some are considering voice/tannoy systems

These are certainly a step up from using the fire alarm system, but in their own way introduce a different set of problems.

Firstly, live voice based systems can be easily misunderstood, especially where multiple languages maybe needed, so unless the message is repeated on a cycle the chances of someone mishearing a live instruction is high. Consider too that if such information is broadcast site wide it is also audible to any persons presenting the threat. Again there is potential for increase in risk rather than helping to lower it.

So is this a complete no go area...?

There are good reasons where this solution will fit but be careful there are a lot of pitfalls, but these can be overcome with good design.

If the site already has a tannoy system in place and there is ability to control the messaging by area and to apply an auto repeat of a very short coded message then this could be your most costs effective answer.

However, you would need to consider how you would cover the playing fields if not already and whether the risk of site wide tannoy could escalate a situation rather than contain it. Using coded messages, like those often used in retail environments could assist in this area. What appears an innocent enough message asking for a particular member of staff, actually is a secret code to alert certain staff to respond in a set way. If you don't already have a tannoy system then this is a costly option as cabling infrastructure is disruptive and expensive.

Mobile phone base systems

In principle it is generally agreed that mobile phone based systems are a bit of a no-no for these applications. Most education sites would not issue staff with mobile phones therefore it is likely you would be trying to use the teachers own personal mobile over which the school has no authority or control. This would include battery charging, misuse during school time for personal use let alone the issues over signal coverage being in the hands of a 3rd party mobile phone operator

Whilst this can be considered for a backup, to use as the primary method via apps like WhatsApp, these provide no level of redundancy or reliability of the service or app being used. To consider it as a reliable and efficient 1st line method of alerting is flawed from the outset.

So what IS the alternative?

There are justifiable cases where some of the above solutions could be considered as acceptable, but each have their own set of shortcomings, but as long as the site is aware of these and mitigates them via proper risk assessment, then one would image they'll solve a few sites problem.

The best Lockdown system is one designed for the purpose

A dedicated system designed for emergency and communication would be by far the most effective system, but likely costlier compared to modifying an existing system.

A dedicated system that provides Plain English and colour coded text based messaging to dedicated devices for discreet communication, is a typical solution and would include devices that teachers and staff have on their person, supplied by the school and dedicated for school communication use only.

Such a system may also enable staff to communicate with each other via the devices and activate emergency assistance calls themselves to other nearby devices or designated response staff. Using colour coded displays allows immediate recognition of an incident as well as multiple messaging levels.

The added benefit would be that other requests such as medical assistance request on the sports field could be made along with reception staff being able to call for assistance when trouble or violence breaks out within the grounds.

Lone workers can also be catered for with such systems, helping a school look after its caretakers and maintenance staff that often work alone and out of school normal hours and holidays.

Do these systems exist?

Such systems do exist but possibly not in the obvious places to look for them and why typically schools turn to their security and fire system providers who, (and I'm generalising here), often have little experience in emergency call systems and protocols needed at this level, or what system may best suit their customer.

We've been installing our systems for over 20 years in various applications and our StaffWatch Lockdown system for education is our solution to the education site's needs. We use our 20+ years of working within the emergency call system sector to enable us to design specific solutions for each individual's site's needs.

Whether something is expensive is a perception thing. These types of system are mainly wireless so they're quick to install with minimal site disruption to a live site, so may well be far more cost effective than wiring a site and certainly more convenient.

System like these have multiple uses for communication too, not just Lockdown. They add better site control, and have the added bonus of Lone Working and medical assistance request on the sports field or around the site.

In Summary.....

As the main information coming from Councils and Government doesn't always go deep enough into the "how" it leaves ambiguity as to what is effective ways to communicate across a school, thus leaving many schools to their own devices with limited access to information and often turning to their security/fire systems provider who in some cases has little to no working knowledge of this level of emergency call systems and are ill-equipped to advise and risk themselves and their businesses should they advise incorrectly. So, with limited budgets, getting this wrong could be costly in more ways than one.

Consider too that using a site wide broadcast system that all can hear including unaccompanied Pupils, may lead to a sense of panic and an unpredictable response during times where control is essential to everyone's safety. A system that only communicates to required staff is far more effective at safeguarding all concerned allowing panic free action.

I hope the above gives some and indication of the shortcomings and risks associated with use of some of the above existing systems, which appear more cost effective but in reality could create further vagueness at a critical time.

If you would like advice or more information/clarification for your own application, or you know a site that needs some help then feel free to call us....

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