

# The Safety Minute

## **“Why is That”?**

- Mark Feddersen

Have you ever looked around your school and wondered “why is that gate always left open” or “why is that door always unlocked”?

Well, if you said, “yes” then you are not alone. All over the state, school officials are asking themselves similar questions and all too often the answer is the same, “I don’t know why?” Through the course of time, processes and procedures take on a life of their own. If you are not careful, you can be exposing your school to unnecessary vulnerabilities. One way to reduce and/or eliminate preventable exposure is to conduct practical evaluations using this measured question, “Is there an operational need for this process or procedure to continue in this way?”

As you evaluate your, “Why is that” scenarios you may be surprised what you find, such as:

- That gate is always open because on Thursdays the local garbage company empties a dumpster located inside the gate. Is there an operational need to keep the gate open, except for Thursday garbage pick-up?

*Review/Answer: No.*

- That door is always unlocked to allow District Maintenance personnel to have unfettered access to the interior Boiler Room. Is there an operational need to keep the door unlocked all the time for the periodic arrival of District Maintenance?

*Review/Answer: No - District Maintenance employees acquired their own key and no longer need the door to be unlocked for them.*

So here is your “Why is that” list challenge, if you chose to accept it.

Look around your school, discuss with your school safety team, and inquire of your parents and students. Make a list from your discussions and evaluate using the operational need test.

**You may be surprised what you find.**

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## **Kidding Ourselves: “I Am Always In My Building”**

- Brian Armes

“But, I am always in my building”, he said as we sat around the conference table at the District Office. The irony of that declaration was lost on many of my colleagues, and I couldn’t help but chuckle. Whenever you tell yourself that you are *always* available, you may want to take a quick look around.

As building administrators, you are the policy maker, public information officer, operations chief, and all around problem-solver. However, what happens during that inevitable district meeting, during court, or when you are in surgery? Inevitably, it seems, “No matter how often I am available, the minute I am not, something will go wrong”! Ask yourself, who is left to make decisions and manage the school incidents? While you may be available by phone, emergencies demand presence.

Even though an administrator’s role may call them off campus, there are usually staff behind who are capable of managing a large-scale incident. What remains to be determined is if those individuals understand their responsibilities and have been endowed with the authority to carry them out. As an administrator ask yourself, “Do I have a plan to cover all of the necessary roles during an emergency?” If you expect the secretary to be your primary backup when you are gone, they will likely remain in that role until you or a district administrator shows up. However, if the secretary is running the incident (emergency) and providing operational direction to other staff members, who is answering the phone, the intercom, texts and emails? My personal recommendation is to plan for backfilling positions three people deep.

As you know all too well, a school emergency generally involves a lot of moving parts, expands quickly, and requires a high degree of flexible creative decisions. I ask each of you to do your staff a favor. Sit down with those key people who you count on in your absence. Together, look over the ICS Planning tool for schools; initiate a written plan of succession in which your key staff know their roles. Then share that plan with your entire school staff. One of the greatest gifts a building administrator can give is a clear, written, line of succession for those times he or she may be unavailable.

### **Closed Doors and Open Minds**

- Mike Munger

From the founding of the Idaho Territory, schools have been important gathering spaces for community functions. In many towns and counties, the school house is the only building suited to community elections, events, and gatherings that allow rural life to survive and thrive. This community-centric mindset often translated into the school day itself, with popular belief that the school was common property, open and welcoming to all. This once-popular assumption is beginning to change in schools across the state.

Parents, especially younger parents who themselves grew up in the shadow of Columbine, are beginning to embrace a much more limited view of school access. Additionally, inexpensive cameras and door releases at the main entryway have made it much less burdensome for schools to “buzz you in”. These two factors, parents’ vocal request and the recent ease of implementation have significantly lowered the burden to implement controlled access at schools.

Many elementary schools are incorporating a controlled waiting area just inside the main door, normally with a transaction window into the main office. The doors are unlocked to allow students into the building at the beginning of the day. After last bell, the doors are secured between the waiting area and the main school. From that point on, any parent or visitor is screened by the office staff, badged, and then admitted to the site, if admittance is justified.

This small operational change reduces many of the traditional headaches of elementary administrators. Non-Custodial Dad, Forgotten-Lunch Mom, and Confrontational Grandma are all stopped at the front door and appropriately handled before they can disrupt the educational process.

As with any operational change it should not be undertaken lightly, but with more schools implementing controlled access the established standard of care may be evolving. As new schools are built and older facilities remodeled, controlled access may very well be an emerging community expectation.

### **The Right Message, to the Right People, at the Right Time**

- Guy Bliesner

There is a military axiom that states, “Without communications there is no command and control”. What is true for the military is true for schools as well. However, not all types of communications systems are created equal. Being heard is not the same as clearly communicating. In reality, there is a vast difference between seemingly similar systems. In operation, these differences can become critical.

Consider an older school where the initially installed P.A./intercom system has been replaced with an I.P. based phone system. The intercom function of these systems generally will send a message to each handset in the system. Too often, the public address function has been lost. Given this, staff and students in hallways, gyms, cafeteria, restrooms, and on the school grounds may not hear announcements, up to and including a Lock Down.

The use of cell phone communications has become the de facto standard in most schools. Cell phones are common, dependable, and have a couple of serious limitations that should be considered in school operations. The first, most obvious, and least considered; When a call is made someone must answer. Second, is the one person-to-one person nature of cell phone calls. Depending on the circumstance a large number of people could all need the same information, and delivery of that information may be time sensitive. Additionally, most school situations are fluid, with changes occurring rapidly requiring those involved needing to be continually updated. A task not well suited to cell phones.

Two-way radio may offer a more effective approach. Radio allows for a rapid two way flow of information shared among a large number of people. The use of a one-to-many radio network will keep everyone involved in the event up to date and working under the same operational picture. Radio too has its limitations. Any message requiring a high degree of privacy is better transmitted by cell phone. Schools should review all their communications processes and systems, and develop plans and procedures to assure that the right message can be delivered to the right people at the right time.

