

Why Video Surveillance in Schools is a Good Idea

By: Brian Gouin

Much has been written about the pros and cons of deploying cameras and video surveillance systems in schools. Many scholarly articles are inherently biased as they are written by agents of the CCTV industry, and are mostly pro. Others are written by those against camera coverage anywhere for any reason. Still other articles list perceived pros and cons of installing these systems in schools but have no factual basis for their claims, thus diminishing their legitimacy.

This paper will attempt to cut through these unsupported assertions. It explains why some commonly listed pros are not sound reasons to install video surveillance systems in schools, why some commonly listed cons are not valid, and some legitimate reasons to install video management systems in schools.

Often published yet unsubstantiated reasons in support of camera systems in schools include:

1. Cameras deter crime – This is almost exclusively the main reason listed for installing cameras in schools, or anywhere else for that matter. It sounds good, even logical, but in fact there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that it's true. Multiple studies have been conducted to address whether or not cameras deter crimes and there is no conclusive study that they do. At best, results have been non-conclusive in either direction. Anecdotally, if cameras did deter crime, there would not be nearly as many crimes committed on camera footage regularly seen.
2. Cameras prevent bullying - Again, there is no compelling evidence to suggest this is true. The use of cameras may displace the bullying to areas of the school without cameras, but there is little evidence to indicate cameras prevent it. Bullying is a much more complicated social problem than one that can be solved by camera coverage.
3. Cameras prevent bad behavior from students or teachers – This claim certainly suggests some truth but is also unverifiable. It is very hard to prove or disprove a negative, e.g. less bad behavior would have happened with cameras or more bad behavior would have happened without cameras. Unlike crime statistics, it is nearly impossible to quantify instances of simple bad behavior. However, if there is little evidence that crimes or bullying are deterred by cameras, it is difficult to believe that lesser bad behavior would be.
4. Cameras prevent intruders from entering the premises – Video management systems used alone do not deter entry. Access control systems, locked doors, and stringent access policies do prevent intruders or unauthorized visitors and parents from entering the premises.

Here are some often published cons relating to the use of camera systems in schools that, which are still not valid reasons:

1. Cameras are an invasion of privacy (for both students and teachers) – While a healthy debate of this issue is both timely and justified, and history may prove it to be true, current societal norms have settled this question. Cameras are everywhere, in both public and private buildings and on the streets. Until the court system in the U.S. determines such camera coverage is illegal (such as coverage in bathrooms and locker rooms), personal opinions on privacy restrictions are not legitimate reasons to ignore the important reasons for camera coverage in schools.
2. Video surveillance systems are costly – While camera systems are by no means inexpensive, they have actually gone down in price over the years and are in line with costs of other modern technology employed in today's schools. In addition, schools have many high priced needs so cost alone is not the only determining factor for decisions.
3. Cameras destroy the trust and relationship between teachers and students as well as between staff and administration - This is a subjective point, but it seems that a brief conversation with students about why the cameras are needed would allay any trust issues. As far as staff and administration, a large portion of corporate and public employers now use security cameras in those settings. To suggest school systems have no reason to consider the same practice is presumptuous.

While it may seem so far that there are not any legitimate reasons to utilize video management systems in schools, that is not the case. Cameras and video management systems are vital to the safety and security of students, teachers, and staff. The following are legitimate and verifiable reasons why cameras and a video management system should be installed in schools:

1. Recorded camera footage is used for forensic investigation and evidence – The most powerful use of cameras is to determine what did or did not happen after an incident or alleged incident. The importance of this evidence cannot be overstated for the legal and physical protection for the school, students, and staff. There is little ambiguity about what occurred when video footage exists. There are countless examples of video footage being used as evidence including:
 - To help police investigate crimes – theft, vehicle destruction, and other crimes
 - Help investigate vandalism
 - Help investigate accidents

- Verify or disprove inappropriate or bad behavior from students, faculty, staff, or visitors
 - Protect faculty from false accusations – such as sexual harassment charges from students
 - Protect students from false accusations
 - Protect the school from false allegations which can lead to expensive lawsuits
 - Hold school staff accountable for wrongdoing
 - Verify truancy
2. Camera systems integrate with other systems to monitor alarms and assist in preventing unwanted visitors - If the school also employs an access control system or intrusion system that generates alarms to be monitored or reacted to, the addition of cameras is invaluable support to staff in determining the validity of those alarms. This is helpful in preventing unwanted visitors from entering the school.
 3. Video management systems demonstrate due diligence – In today’s litigious society, it is imperative that organizations and people exercise a reasonable amount of care to protect people. A functional video management system goes a long way to show that reasonable care was taken, which is very important in a court of law.

Cameras alone are not a complete security solution and should not be presented as such. Nor are they the symbol of all that is wrong. Despite all the false assertions and unsound reasons that cast doubt in the minds of reasonable people faced with a purchasing decision, there is defined and verifiable rationale in favor of employing cameras and video management systems in schools.

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