



Association of Christian Schools International

## Balancing Security and the Emotional Well-Being of Students

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In our small, friendly school the idea of a terrorist attack and the need for security and locked gates seemed laughable. Our children came and went with ease. Duty teachers did patrol the grounds during elementary playtimes but only to prevent inappropriate behavior. The junior high and high school students had our trust. We locked the school gates and doors only as darkness fell.

All this utopian freedom was shattered on September 11, 2001, as the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center collapsed. Since we are situated in an Asian country only 400 to 500 kilometers from Islamic militant groups, we suddenly felt vulnerable. It was obvious that we needed tighter security, yet the low-key, relaxed openness in our community was a cultural stamp—a part of how we defined ourselves. Because the missionary experience is an abnormal one that separates us from the familiarity of our own home cultures, our school sought to provide some of those missing elements through a friendly community of extended family—the family of God—all here with common goals and experiences.

Constant change, insecurity, and instability are hallmarks of an MK's (missionary kid's) life experience. People come and go with a shattering regularity throughout their lives; families and friends relocate, not to the next town but across the world. Political upheaval and laws banning religious freedom constantly threaten to overturn the small islands of stability that exist in their lives. Our school, like all MK schools, is a significant island of stability in the lives of children and their missionary parents (Adams 2002). In this arid desert land our goal was to support and strengthen our students' families, providing a metaphorical oasis, a place of refreshing and gathering, where each of our 126 students could experience childhood and school experiences that were as normal as possible.

Now a pertinent question arose: How do schools balance security needs with the emotional well-being of their communities? In the fear-induced atmosphere immediately following 9/11, we strengthened the gates and installed new fences around the perimeter. A multitude of cell phones suddenly appeared, ringing from the depths of schoolbags—always, it seemed, in the middle of a class.

Unfortunately, it was easy to let the initial wave of security slacken once the war in Afghanistan had ceased. As the cool of winter set in, our fears calmed and the security relaxed once more. The frozen ground through winter prevented the installation of the concrete blocks under the fence, so a foot-high gap still invited anyone to enter. The newly hired guards, while initially on heightened alert, began to weary of the heavy padlock on the gate. Thus, through much of the subsequent year, it hung open during daylight hours.

Then came a reminder of the importance of security and a further catalyst for increasing security: the August 5, 2002, armed invasion of Murree Christian School in Pakistan. Here was an MK school similar to ours, and several of our students had previously attended there; suddenly this event was too close to home. If terrorists were searching for foreign-run missionary schools in Central Asia, they would not have to look far to find us.

Several armed men belonging to a militant Islamic organization forced themselves onto the Murree school grounds, opening fire and shooting the security guards who attempted to resist them (Aleem 2002). Fortunately, the staff in the building, alerted to trouble, instituted immediate lockdown procedures, preventing the gunmen access to the building. A louder wake-up call we did not need.

Schools should provide a secure lockable facility because safety and physical health are essential to successful learning and emotional well-being. While no one really wants to believe that their city is unsafe or that their school is a potential target, schools are negligent if they ignore the possibilities and do not plan for the worst. A well-prepared school can face security breaches with courage, flexibility, and resilience. Planning, preparation, and practice among the staff of

how to respond to an armed invasion are essential. Many educators and legislators are even advocating actively drilling students on how to respond to such events (Taylor 2002). However, repetitive drills among the student body can be emotionally damaging, causing anxiety and fear, which are also serious blocks to successful learning. Even without an attack, the knowledge that attacks have occurred in similar schools and the observations of heightened security measures in their own school can cause anxiety in some children.

Maintaining security takes commitment, personnel, and systems that are suitable for the task. Schools frequently do not have funding for the necessary personnel and resources to adequately implement and continue effective security. It may be tempting, especially in a low-staffed, low-funded school, to use "faith" as an excuse for negligence. Yet, we must be diligent in guarding the students entrusted to our keeping during school hours.

Commitment to security is the responsibility of the entire school community. While the school administration sets corporate standards, the parents, staff, and students need to fully cooperate. One of our new security measures has been a tightening on gate patrol. A newly installed electric lock keeps the gate closed to intruders at all times. Part-time students now have a fixed schedule of agreed-upon arrival and exit times, requiring prior parental and school approval for deviations. While the older students initially chafed at the extra security, they are learning to settle into the new routines. The successful implementation of new procedures would not be possible without the full support of the parents, security staff, office staff, and students themselves.

Security personnel may not always involve guards, but all schools should have a designated staff advisor or advisory committee to draft and determine security policy and procedures. These systems should involve well-posted and practiced evacuation plans (Brody 2001). While the staff need to be well versed in lockdown procedures, repetitive drills are not necessary for the students. The most essential factors for students in a lockdown situation are that they remain calm and that they listen to and obey the teacher in charge. The standard evacuation drills are an excellent time to practice a calm disposition in crisis (Taylor 2002). It is essential that teachers also model this calmness. Obedience should be an essential character quality expected in all schools. When students are accustomed to first-time obedience and a close trust relationship exists between the teacher and class, then the teacher will be able to command the students in a time of crisis.

It is essential that schools ensure safe and secure boundaries and lockable facilities but not at the expense of protecting and safeguarding their students' right to a childhood free of excessive fear and anxiety. All schools must engage in this balancing act of ensuring both the physical safety and the emotional well-being of their students. We want them to graduate as confident and secure individuals, but most of all, we want them alive.

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