CPTED 101: Crime Prevention through Environmental Design — The Fundamentals for Schools

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CPTED 101 applies to both new and existing schools and is built on three simple concepts: *natural surveillance*, *natural access control*, and *territoriality*. If your school layout seems unsafe, adopting a few CPTED fundamentals may help make it significantly safer.[1]

Natural surveillance is the physical ability to see what's going on in and around your school. Solid walls, tall shrubs, parked cars, outbuildings, sculptures, large signs, and other obstacles can block natural surveillance. If there are locations on your campus where problems often occur, are they hidden from view? If so, look for ways to increase visibility. Some common approaches include:

- Installing openings or windows in solid walls, to increase visual exposure.

- Replacing solid walls with wrought iron fencing.

- Blocking access to the hidden area entirely.

- Removing any welcoming features, such as benches, that draw people into the hidden area.

If these relatively "natural" arrangements don't do the job, install convex mirrors to provide visibility around corners, consider electronic surveillance equipment, or increase patrols.

The concept of natural surveillance suggests that the more lighting, the better. Paradoxically, it doesn't always work that way. Sometimes good lighting attracts misbehavior, while darkness drives people away. Many schools have gone to darkened campuses for this reason. School resource officers have found that good lighting made schools ideal hangouts after hours, while

darkness discouraged kids from congregating. Those who did trespass after hours often were often easy to spot due to the glow of cigarettes or flashlights.

Room and furniture layouts within the school itself present especially good opportunities for improving safety. For example, the school receptionist is in a key position to conduct natural surveillance. Try sitting at the reception desk. What can you see, and what is hidden? Is your back to the door? Is there a high counter, a computer monitor, a vase, a poster, or a solid wall blocking your view of people approaching the school? Does a security monitor display images from throughout the site? Look for ways to remove obstacles and expand visibility.

If students can enter the school grounds through secondary entry points, consider relocating the librarian's station, the school resource officer's post, or even a snack shop to provide live, natural surveillance where none existed before. Frequently, posters on windows or even closed blinds are obstacles to natural surveillance. These are easily remedied. If teachers close blinds against glare, consider tinting windows or installing overhanging eaves to create shade. This reduces the need to close blinds and increases the ability of teachers to watch what's going on outside.

Access control is the ability to decide who gets in and out of your school. Many schools have so many buildings, breezeways, unlocked doors, and open windows that access is essentially unrestricted, despite any rules to the contrary. At most, signs are posted suggesting that visitors report to the office, but nothing compels them to do so. If this is a problem at your school, some options include:

- Re-configuring as many excess entry doors as possible so that they automatically lock when closed and only serve as emergency exits.

- Replacing or re-configuring windows so that they can't be used as entry points for people or contraband. In some cases, repairing the HVAC system is an essential step—if people are too hot, they'll open the windows and

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[1] See also the NCEF publications *Mitigating Hazards in School Facilities*, *Improving School Access Control*, *Low-Cost Security Measures for Schools*, and others at NCEF's Safe School Facilities webpage.

no policy is likely to stop them. Small windows or windows covered with grates are other possible solutions if they don't need to serve as emergency exits.

The fewer the entry points, the less pressure the school is under to try to staff them.

Don't, however, go overboard on access control. Every occupied space should have at least two means of egress. If a threat enters at point A (and this can be anything from a swarm of bees to a fire or gunman), students should still be able to flee through point B. Some specialized windows incorporate an emergency latch so they can be used as exits when needed.

The school receptionist should also have the ability to institute a lockdown with the touch of a button—most receptionists are not trained or equipped to deal with a serious threat otherwise. If nothing else, provide the receptionist with the ability to remotely lock the main entry.

Territoriality and maintenance are sometimes considered as distinct factors, but they're often intertwined. Territoriality refers to measures that reinforce a message of ownership over the school. The most straight-forward examples of territoriality are signs restricting access, directing visitors to the office, or posting campus closing times. (Gangs understand this concept and use it extensively, claiming turf by posting their own signs, usually recognizable as graffiti.)

Defining clear borders is another step that reinforces territoriality. A low fence or hedge around the edge of the school property may not physically stop a trespasser, but it helps identify where public space ends and school space begins.

Maintenance further reinforces territoriality—any unkempt part of the campus sends a message that no one is particularly concerned about or possessive of that part of the school. If the area behind the gym is used for dumping broken chairs, people will consider that area fair game for discarding just about anything else. If the area is generally neglected, it will also seem ideal for misbehavior.

Applying the most fundamental CPTED concepts, natural surveillance, natural access control, and territoriality, are the basic first steps to reducing crime on campus. They are great places to start when it comes to improving school safety.

References

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Additional Information

See the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities annotated bibliography, *CPTED for Schools,* online at *http://www.ncef.org/rl/cpted.cfm*