

Keep Your School Safe; In the Simplest of Ways

By [Derrick Crews](#), ICPS

On September 27th, 2006, a 53-year-old man walked into Platte Canyon High School, student population less than 500. He was not a parent or an employee, but a sick man planning to molest young girls. Before lunch, he took over a classroom, methodically holding female students and releasing others. Over the course of a few hours, he molested the female hostages, killed one, and then took his own life.

As administrators, we know that a safe school is necessary in order to have a productive learning environment. Obvious ways to prevent or mitigate strangers on your campus can include: locking exterior and classroom doors; the use of surveillance cameras; a visitor's log along with ID badges; or landscaping designed to minimize concealment areas. However, it is my strong belief that these steps are rendered useless when we fail to employ one of the simplest safety strategies: talking to staff and students about understanding and reporting unidentified people at school.



In the Platte Canyon High School incident, the attacker was on campus for several hours and seen by numerous students. Prevention failed when the students did not tell anyone until after the fact. Students described the visitor as a, "shabby, unkempt" man and he, "looked out of place." Another student stated, "...looked pretty suspicious to me as he sipped a clear liquid from a bottle" while in the student parking lot. Still another student stated, "He was looking at us with rage in his eyes...he just stared at us with angry eyes." No one was told until it was too late. Once the visitor took hostages, the police were called, and they arrived within *three minutes!*



My experience with staff and students has taught me that the majority want to do the right thing. The key is that we must be sure to tell them (and remind them) what is the right thing to do. Many times, in our quest to keep schools safe, we fail to recognize that

the simplest and least technical methods may be the most effective at keeping us from harm's way. The Platte Canyon HS incident resulted in a committee being created.

The Safe and Security Advisory Task Committee concluded in one of their findings that, "The most effective tools for securing our campuses are the eyes and ears of our staff, students, and volunteers." This is no more than talking to staff and students about unidentified people on campus. North Carolina's New Hanover County Schools learned just how important it is to talk to staff and students. Dr. Caroline Clemments at UNC Wilmington presented her findings on reporting strangers on campus at the 2007 Safe, Orderly & Caring Schools Conference. Her presentation entitled, *Who's Wandering Your Halls?*, utilized trained "intruders" walking onto school campuses. Their goal was to roam the hallways, and document how long it took before being approached by staff. The average time that these "intruders" spent on campus before being stopped at middle schools was 21.4 minutes and for high schools 18.2 minutes. From a security viewpoint this is *too long* for a stranger to be at a school. She concluded that parents, teachers, and students need to be encouraged about monitoring their school campus. Visitors should be approached to inquire about their business and or the school office be notified about the person.

As administrators, when considering methods for keeping your school safe, don't overlook the simple task of talking to your staff and students. Explain what should be done when they see an unidentified person on campus. Establish a procedure to handle such a situation. After training them, actually practice it. One method is an intruder drill. The drill includes a volunteer walking through your school to determine when or if their presence will be reported. The volunteer should not wear a visitor's badge and should not be someone that comes to the school often.

This drill is very simple and does not disturb the learning environment. I can personally testify that most people at our schools became more confident and attentive to unidentified visitors after our intruder drills. Keeping your school safe does not have to be expensive or time consuming. Just remember talking to your teachers, staff, parents, and students is the first step to getting them all to work together towards this goal. As principals and assistant principals it is your responsibility to initiate the talk toward reaching this goal.

Interested in learning more? [Click here for more safety tips.](#)

Derrick Crews is a veteran law enforcement officer and is currently assigned to working with a middle and elementary school. He is a law enforcement in-service instructor at Davidson County Community College.