TECHguide

Keeping an eye on our schools

Surveillance is becoming more common with CCTV and internet networks being installed in playgrounds and other areas. Jade Harrison reports.

Security cameras and the introduction of high-grade surveillance in schools has resulted in a controversial social debate over the past decade, as teachers, parents and the general public set aside concerns about becoming an "over-monitored society", for the prospect of safer schools.

While the privacy issue rears its head from passionate naysayers, it's hard to deny that the introduction of surveillance equipment in schools has had a profound impact on curbing a range of wrongful activities.

Criminal activity on school grounds has been a growing concern for the federal government, the education sector and the Federal Police for many decades. Back in 1989, The Australian Institute of Criminology stated that the school arson and vandalism bill had reached $14 million a year in NSW alone.

Tech Guide contact many of the state education departments to get updated figures on damage at schools from vandalism and other crimes but was told this was not available. However, this has not stopped security initiatives from popping up.

The latest is the federal Secure Schools Program. Starting back in 2007, the $20 million security-related funding program was designed to help government and non-government schools meet security needs to tackle racially motivated violence, property crime and harassment.

This year, 57 schools across the country benefited from round 3 of the funding for amounts reaching up to $700,000 an institution. Each school has different security needs ranging from digital surveillance systems through to fencing.

Security fences
Mabel Park State High School in Slacks Creek, southern Brisbane, used its funding of $282,593 to build a large two-metre high perimeter fence in a bid to curb vandalism.

"It's to keep unwanted people out during the holidays and on weekends. When people are idle and they drift towards destroying things. We just had school holidays and we came back to half a dozen smashed windows. So hopefully that will be reduced once the fence is complete," says principal Mike O'Connor.

While a fence may be enough to keep vandalism away from some schools, some educational institutions need to up the ante to protect against high-level vandalism, arson, theft and schoolyard bullying.

There's a range of products and systems on the market. The trend is of a shift away from more traditional analogue-based systems such as closed-circuit TV (CCTV) for more technologically advanced digital systems such as internet protocol (IP) surveillance, however schools are across the country are embracing both methods.

IP surveillance employs digital video cameras which, unlike analogue CCTV cameras, can send and receive data via a computer network and the internet. Ettore Alterisio is sales and marketing manager for commercial channels at D-link, a global company that installs about 50 surveillance systems into schools around the country each year.

He says traditional analogue systems, such as CCTV, are now being superseded by IP surveillance. IP is more feature rich, offering higher-image resolution, high-definition scalability plus it can film from greater distances. The IP camera connects directly to a network via an ethernet cable, which then records security footage to a storage device or streams live via the internet so that the footage can be viewed remotely.

"IP is now taking over in terms of surveillance solutions. The beauty of IP is it's another device that sits on a LAN, requires minimal cabling and is the future of monitoring and surveillance solutions," says Alterisio.

The company sets up surveillance cameras, wireless access points, software and storage into schools, with each school having different requirements. "From our experience, the main concerns from schools are about bullying in the school grounds, vandalism and theft in classrooms or computer rooms, libraries and sporting fields both during and after school hours," he says. "Then there's the need to address things like perimeter surveillance and monitoring different parts of the school during school hours and on weekends and holidays.

"A commonality is to be able to record and retain footage for specified periods and in areas where the zone is large such as an oval, we are seeing the requirement for wireless surveillance in the form of a wireless outdoor camera and wireless access points."

Monitoring behaviour
Randwick Boys High School in Sydney's east recently installed CCTV surveillance in the key areas of the school including the library, entry points, playground and canteen areas. They used Austral Surveillance to upgrade the computer network and integrate the CCTV into the computer system. Introduced in four stages, and rolled out over several budgetary periods, the school has introduced 24 cameras so far.

Principal Wayne Duncombe says the surveillance was introduced for a number of reasons and the various locations around the schools were chosen in a bid to minimise loss. He says the camera in the library was installed to monitor security of the collection and minimise loss, while the one in the bag holding area was to minimise risk of theft, and to provide a record of any incidents that might occur in the area.

The school also installed cameras in the playground to monitor activity, minimise bag theft in the playground, record any incidents that might occur and to ensure students used age-appropriate toilets.

While there were some cameras used inside the school, there was also a focus on entry points.
"The CCTV installed to cover the entrance ways was to monitor the use of the school out of hours, to monitor who came on to the site during the day and to identify students who might try to truant from the school during the day," he says.

Duncombe has already noticed the positive affects of installing the surveillance in the school.

"Issues in relation to the library collection have effectively disappeared, incidents in relation to issues in the bag area of the library have reduced significantly too," he says.

A fight which erupted in the area this year was captured on CCTV and used as evidence to support disciplinary action that followed.

He also says that the cameras in the playground have contributed to good order and have deterred students from getting up to mischief – especially around the toilet blocks.

"Incidents where students might have entered toilet blocks for activities such as smoking have been reduced (though not eliminated) by the presence of CCTV. Students entering the toilets repeatedly can now be identified and this has led to a reduction of inappropriate behaviour in and around the toilets."

When it comes to implementing CCTV or surveillance into schools for the first time, Ettore says there can be some concerns from parents and students. As a result, he has often attended meetings held with the P&T committee at various schools to discuss the pros and cons of introducing surveillance such as IP or CCTV into a school.

Duncombe says both teachers and parents were supportive of the CCTV implementation at Randwick. "The parents have been extremely supportive of the actions taken and teachers are supportive of the program."

And when it comes to getting caught red-handed, for some students, there's simply nowhere to hide any more.
"Students who have been identified and interviewed regarding incidents following the use of CCTV footage have tended to me more willing to admit to behaviours as a result of the footage. Parents of these students, have been supportive of the school's subsequent actions having been able to see their children's behaviour for themselves."