

Safer schools

BY JENNIFER BROWN

Niagara Catholic District School Board tightens access controls to elementary schools.

When the province of Ontario announced three years ago it was offering up cash to school boards to improve security and safety, the reaction was mixed. Parents were concerned their facilities would become locked down fortresses.

The funding was made available to strengthen the Safe Schools Act, which gives a school principal the right and authority to refuse entry of any person and they can ask someone to leave if they believe the person poses a danger. That provision made it became important for schools to control access to their facilities.

However, there were some schools in Ontario where the main office was not in view of the main entrance.

The province would provide funding to problem-prone schools, up to \$4,000 per school. Using that money, the school board could install a video camera and voice intercom buzzer system so that someone in the office could see and hear who was at the door and let them in. The front doors had to remain locked at all times if a school were to be eligible for the funding. It became a controversial issue in some communities.

Some regions, however, like the Niagara Catholic District School board, based in Welland, Ont., saw it as an opportunity to improve safety for students and took advantage of the funding.

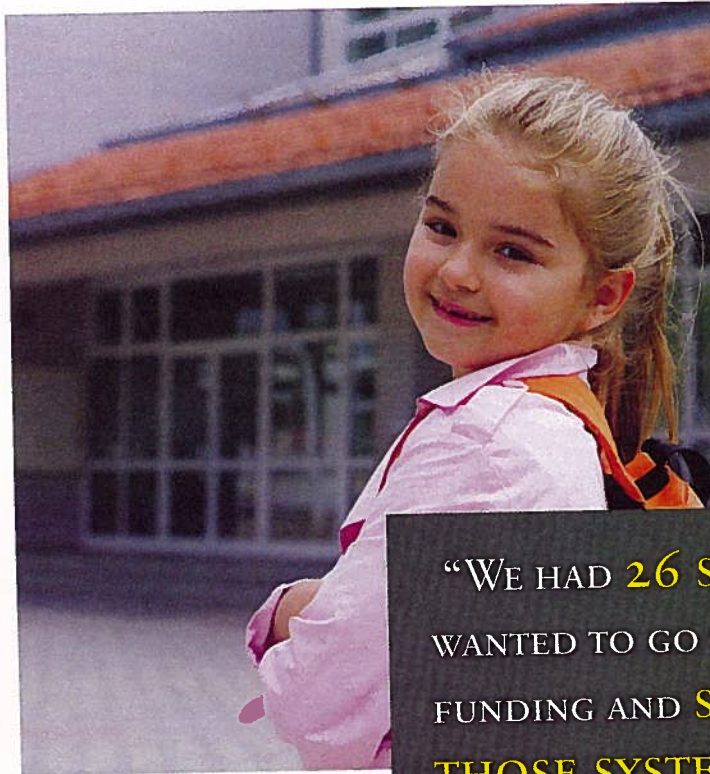
"We had 26 schools and they all wanted to go this way, and we got the funding and started installing those systems," says James Woods, Controller of Plant Services with the Niagara Catholic District School Board.

"When we first started out with this locking the doors idea the parents thought we were locking them out of the school, but security has always been an issue and we're always concerned about the safety of the children left in our care," says Woods. "If somebody comes in, they're supposed to report to the office; they're supposed to have visitor badge if they are allowed to go further into the school."

With intruder incidents happening in other districts, opinions on the matter started to change and soon, Woods says, parents were asking, "Can you do our school next?"

Today, all 53 elementary schools in the NCDSB and the board office are equipped with camera and intercom systems at the entry point and have Keyscan access control systems integrated with that at a cost of about \$300,000.

To guard against vandalism, the card readers were mounted behind security glass and the wires run inside the door mullion, eliminating the need for conduit or



so we went with a browser-based system with a Sony camera so anyone with the IP address could see the front door camera," says Joe McCann, regional sales manager of Bulldog Fire & Security.

The board's coordinator of protective systems in charge of security and fire alarm systems, Sergio Cassolato, can also control the doors remotely.

"He doesn't even have to take off his slippers," Woods says.

The board can also go into lockdown from the board office or from the site.

With so many doors in a school, it's virtually impossible to totally control access,

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exposed wiring chases.

The security upgrade began two years ago, with half the schools done in 2006/2007 and the remaining half in 2007/2008.

Every school has an IP camera on the front door and select schools have a digital video recorder and other cameras around the property.

Working with Kitchener-Waterloo, Ont.-based Bulldog Fire & Security, the board now has a networked camera and access control system.

"The system includes a camera that goes on our network and the voice intercom is on our telephone network. Any computer in the building can see the picture of who is at the school and any phone can talk to them and you can release a door by pushing a button on a telephone," says Woods.

There doesn't have to be a secretary sitting in the office with a view of the monitor; it can be the principal at their desk or in the staffroom.

"You can always check the door and alleviate the parents concerns that they would be at the front door with no one answering," says Woods.

The original access control system NCDSB deployed was implemented by another company, but the schools decided they didn't want the access control software residing on their PCs.

"It wasn't as versatile because it was limited to one or two PCs and the schools change their PCs quite often and they didn't want the software to be loaded on them,

and in some cases parents are often walking into a child's classroom to pick them up.

"It was becoming a problem for some of the schools. Mostly we didn't know at any one time who was in the school. So we started locking all the exterior doors except for the main door. Then (Education Minister) Gerard Kennedy made the announcement they wanted better control of the main access," says Woods.

Installing a card access system was a natural outcome of needing a better way to control the entrances, says Woods. "With card access, you can control access by giving anyone access at any particular time or building," says Woods.

After years of dealing with key control problems the board decided to put everything on card access. "We always had issues with keys — one would go lost and you'd have to change all the locks and it could be duplicated or passed between person to person."

The NCDSB plans to continue to roll out card access at its other high schools, focusing on making all exterior doors controllable and specialty classrooms, such as chemistry labs and mechanical shops.

Having rolled out the system to all the board's elementary schools, Woods says public opinion has changed dramatically from when the Safe Schools Act funding was first announced by the province three years ago. ■