



## Buyer Beware

### School Shootings Trigger Targeting of School Budgets

KENNETH S. TRUMP

**T**here are many credible, well-meaning vendors offering products to help make our nation's schools safer. Unfortunately, every time there is a high-profile school shooting, there also seems to be a growing number of opportunists who see potential for increasing dollars in their corporate profit margin.

Educators must exercise extreme caution and closely scrutinize the experience, credibility, independence, and expertise of safety and emergency preparedness product vendors,

school security consultants, and related service providers. Failure to do so could result in their district seeing increased potential liability, adverse publicity, and recommendations and products that are not needed or appropriate for their school buildings or for their school budgets.

#### **"Penetrating the School Safety Market"**

In an effort to sell their products, we have seen a growing number of vendor tactics which can confuse and mislead

school boards and administrators.

A few examples include the following.

1. Product vendors who offer “free” school security assessments to schools. But are they really free or do they return recommendations to educators for thousands and thousands of dollars in products that these companies and their “strategic alliance partners” coincidentally sell?
2. “Free” school safety conference and workshops sponsored by product vendors and insurance companies, often in partnership with education or safety associations that are getting their own benefits from these sponsors. The program agendas are often stacked with speakers from the vendor or their partners, that offer safety related products and/or services. Will educators really be getting independent, unbiased, and best practice driven information, or skewed back-door sales pitches?
3. “Free” grant writers provided to districts to help schools pursue federal and state grants for school safety and emergency planning. The vendor-provided “free” grant writer provides a templated proposal in which school district information can be plugged in and the proposal quickly mailed. The process requires little work for the school district.

The catch — the bulk of the grant proposal submitted ends up being for products provided by the product vendor who supplied the “free” grant writer. The district spends most of the grant on the vendor’s product, and once the grant funds are gone, the district could unknowingly get stuck with ongoing maintenance and replacement costs that must then come out of the district’s general operating fund. If school districts craft bids based on vendor-provided specifications that require qualifications and specs only that vendor can meet, that could also be considered a

crime in some jurisdictions.

School administrators with the best of intentions could easily find themselves backed into a corner with few answers as to how they got there and few ideas on how to get out.

### School Security Equipment and Technology

The first and best line of defense in school safety is always a well-trained, highly-alert school staff and student body. Any type of security equipment is only as effective as the weakest human

---

## The qualifications and process for selecting a school security consultant are typically new to even the most experienced school business manager or purchasing agent.

---

link standing behind the equipment. School security technology must be looked upon as a supplement to, but not a substitute for, a more comprehensive school safety program.

Unfortunately, a number of school districts have created a false sense of security in response to high-profile school violence tragedies by moving quickly to install equipment and other physical and tangible measures in response to parental demands for a “guarantee” that such incidents will not happen again.

In our school security assessments across the nation, we find common and consistent themes regarding the use of security equipment in schools. These include:

1. the inappropriate use of the security equipment itself;
2. poor purchasing practices related to school security equipment;

3. a lack of input from building principals, assistant principals, site security and police staff, and other end-users on where equipment is needed and would be most effective in their day-to-day school operations; and

4. a failure to integrate the use of equipment with human, procedural, and other school safety strategies.

When effectively used, however, security technology can contribute toward reducing specifically-identified school safety risks under the appropriate circumstances. School officials should be able to answer a number of questions before employing security equipment. These include the following.

1. What specific security threats and concerns are educators attempting to address by using a particular type of security equipment?
2. How will this equipment help address these threats and how will it actually be used on a day-to-day basis?
3. If the district is able to purchase the equipment today, how will it be maintained, repaired, and upgraded, as necessary, in the years to follow?

School leaders should work with their school security, school police, and/or independent school security specialists to identify the answers to these questions and to determine the unique security equipment needs of each individual school. Educators should never allow product vendors to be solely responsible for conducting security assessments of their schools.

### Types of School Security Consultants

School districts are increasingly turning to school security consultants to conduct school security assessments, evaluate school emergency preparedness plans, conduct professional development training on school safety, and provide related services.

While top school leaders are still typically involved in some aspect of the selection process, today it is more com-

mon for the selection of school security consultants to be delegated to school business managers, purchasing agents, and/or committees of multi-disciplinary district personnel and community agency partners. The qualifications and process for selecting a school security consultant are typically new to even the most experienced school business manager or purchasing agent.

Oftentimes, the result is the posting of flawed qualification criteria, poorly structured requests for proposals, and the use of evaluation processes typically designed for other types of service providers.

To help better understand the school security and emergency preparedness consultant pool, school leaders can expect a large number of interested providers to fall into one of the following categories:

- 1. The “Big Box” Mega-Firms:** These companies are generally big name organizations, often Fortune 500 type-firms, that are not primarily skilled, experienced, or long-term experts in K-12 school security. In an effort to pursue what they believe is a potentially profitable market, they create new divisions or programs which often put a school safety spin around their existing core products and services. The mega-firms tend to have an exceptionally high mark-up. A number of these firms, though, will actually offer “free” assessments in an effort to get their feet inside the school doorway, only to provide assessments with recommendations focused primarily around the products and services they wish to sell.
- 2. Established “Boutique” School Safety Consultancies:** Typically, smaller firms consisting of one person to a handful of associates, these consultants often have greater experience and expertise in K-12 school security and emergency planning. They probably lack the “marketing machine” and

slick sales propaganda, as well as the larger corporate support structure, of bigger firms. While some work nationally, a number may be more established regionally. Fees tend to vary based upon experience, expertise, and national standing in the field. They often have a very good feel for school operations and climate issues of concern to school administrators that is often lacking in other types of consultants.


- 3. Crossover Security Consultants:** Security generalists and/or security specialists from other industries who are trying to expand into the K-12 school market. These individuals may have excellent credentials in corporate security, military security, or federal, state, or local law enforcement, but relatively minimal experience with K-12 schools. They tend to lack in-depth knowledge of school climate, culture, and school-community relations issues typically held by boutique school safety consultants. Their emphasis is often heavily skewed toward physical security measures and equipment.
- 4. Part-Timers and Low-Bidders:** This growing category of school security consultants often consists of individuals who work full-time in school districts as school security or police officials, or in other peripheral positions (such as local police, fire, or emergency management departments) who have turned to consulting for part-time income. They frequently base their fee rates at a significantly lower level than full-time consultants. Their qualifications and skills, such as report writing and skill in managing school politics and school community relations can vary widely. Their availability may be scattered and limited once the work at hand has been completed and they are back at their full-time job.
- 5. Overnight Experts and Charlatans:** These individuals often appear in the market following a spate of

high-profile school safety incidents. They typically have little-to-no established background working in schools and, in particular, in working with school safety issues. A closer look by school officials will often find exaggerated claims of experience and expertise, and little K-12 school safety experience.

Each group of consultant types has its pros and cons. School administrators should look closely for evidence of long-term experience, established credibility in the K-12 school safety market, and a reputation for cutting-edge knowledge in prospective consultants.

## Selecting Qualified Providers

While the needs of each school district will vary, school officials designing RFPs for school security consulting services should provide weighted points to individuals bringing K-12 specific school safety experience. Extensive references should be sought from past school district clients. Individuals with only a few scattered K-12 references should be scrutinized closely, as should those consultants who have extensive experience in other security industries but lack work specifically in school settings.

Security equipment providers and school security consultants can help school leaders improve school safety, reduce risks, and improve school community relations. Selecting qualified, competent, and experienced providers will make the difference between a good experience and one of potentially greater liability. 

**Kenneth S. Trump** is president of National School Safety and Security Services, a Cleveland-based national consulting firm that has worked with school officials from 50 states and Canada on school security and emergency planning issues. He can be reached through his Website, [www.schoolsecurity.org](http://www.schoolsecurity.org).