

Summary
MCCPTA Meeting with
MCPS Department of Safety and Security Leaders
December 5, 2008

The Six-Year CIP includes several major enhancements to school security. All middle schools and high schools are phasing in CCTV (closed circuit television) systems. All schools will get a “visitor management system” which is an automated check in system for visitors to the building. All elementary schools will get an “access control” system that includes cameras at the entrance and an exit door with a buzzer at the entrance. By the end of this school year, 39 schools will have these new systems installed.

On December 5, MCCPTA leaders met with the MCPS Safety and Security leaders to learn more about the technology that is being installed at 39 schools this year. Laurie Halverson, MCCPTA Safety Committee Chair, Kay Romero MCCPTA President and Merry Eisner, MCCPTA VP of Educational issues met with Bob Hellmuth, Director of Safety and Security, Doug Steel, Supervisor, and Anika Browne, Assistant Administrator at Westland Middle School.

Visitor Management System. Upon entering Westland Middle School, we gave our licenses to the front office staff person, our cards were placed into an electronic gizmo and our personal license information came up on the screen. The school administrator prepared a visitor badge and placed a sticker over the “stop” sign on the badge, explaining that if a visitor is there longer than the expected time, the stop sign will “bleed” through the sticker, indicating that school staff should stop the visitor and direct them back to the front office. The “bleed through time” can be adjusted by the computer.

The Visitor Management System takes advantage of a new technology using refurbished computers to save money. It uses the software that is compatible with OASIS software already incorporated throughout the school system and combines it with sex offender data provided from a national database. If a visitor has been convicted of a sex crime, information pops up immediately that informs the staff to get help from their administrator. The computers are used solely for check in and check out of all visitors, including maintenance workers and volunteers. If a visitor does not have a license, it is not required. His name can be typed into the computer. We were assured that nobody gets to enter the classrooms unless the office staff know the person is supposed to be there. The front office staff is trained to ask questions if they don't recognize the person and only to allow a visitor's pass if they are certain of the visitor's purpose. State law requires that no sex offenders are to enter school property, but in the case of a parent who is a sex offender, there could be strict restrictions, such as only allowing the parent to visit after school hours. If a volunteer with the name

“John Smith” enters the building, because of the common name, he can be cross-checked against the birthdate and a picture of the sex offender with the same name, which only takes seconds to obtain.

Next year in 2009/10, 26 more schools will get visitor management systems (pending continuance of the 6-year CIP decisions.) MCPS will look more closely at the layouts of the school administrative office in relation to the front door to determine which schools will be added to the list.

Hackers will not be able to retrieve data from the visitor management system because this system contains its own secure server, allowing only certain MCPS employees and staff to be able to gain access with a confidential password. The information provided on the license does not include Social Security numbers and is kept private.

Volunteer hours will be recorded in the system, which saves a lot of time for schools and PTAs. Currently, one of the challenges is that volunteer hours are not always recorded on the hard copy system and it is time consuming to tally up the hours. The new automated system will track these hours automatically and more accurately.

Searching for the right software was a challenge since most security systems are designed for office buildings, but MCPS found “[Easy Lobby](#)” which allows them to download data at no additional charge compared to a rival, Raptor which charged a fee for the same service.

Because MCPS was one of the first purchasers of a digital surveillance system from a large school system, the cameras were obtained at a very reasonable price.

The next step after the VMS is installed in all the schools is to add the capability of students to use the system-students could use one card for multiple uses, as an ID, for lunch purchases, to identify them as the user on school computers, and more.

CCTV System

The school administrators have software on their computers that allow them to view live feeds from any camera. The videos play all day and can be replayed at any time. However, after 14 days, the videos are purged because of memory space limits of the system.

Currently there are no cameras in classrooms. Reasons given were to protect the privacy of teacher instruction as well as the cost and space needed to store data from all classrooms. Middle Schools have 35-37 cameras and High Schools have 80, but have been wired for 110 to allow for easier installation if future budgets are approved to add more cameras. The cameras are installed in hallways, stairwells, cafeterias and gyms.

The cameras only record when movement is detected and images can be viewed by administrators, security staff, and even Bob Hellmuth can view videos from any of the schools in his office. The images are not always being monitored by staff-the purpose is to monitor during high risk times and to review when incidents occur.

MCPS works with police in criminal investigations and has shared video with them to provide evidence in their cases. A subpoena must be supplied for MCPS to supply the information. Cameras are also being placed outside of some schools, especially those where neighbors and the school community have expressed concern for criminal activity on the school grounds. The community can partner with MCPS and the Montgomery County Police Department to help make the school grounds a safer place outside of school hours.

The Department of Safety and Security has partnered with the IT (technology) Department to save money in the installations of the VMS and CCTV systems. As schools are getting their "tech mods" (technology upgrades which take place on a time schedule for all schools) and exposing wiring over the summer, the new security systems can be installed at the same time to save thousands of dollars per school.

Bob Hellmuth added that as they go through the six-year process of installing cameras, they will continue to provide new technology as it becomes available. They recently learned of a new server that can save thousands of dollars and require only one instead of two servers.

Conclusion

Increased security is an inevitable fact of life these days. The new security technology at MCPS is the best available for a large school system. Other school systems are looking to our county as a benchmark in improving their systems. We don't know the effect the \$9 million dollars for this project will have on the safety and security of our students. Administrators and police are already saying how this is a great tool for providing video evidence of incidents. The benefits reach not just the school system, but also help police and fire departments in investigations. So far, the new system is working well and kinks are still being worked out. Many of the fears associated initially by parents are alleviated as parents learn about and use the system. Local PTAs should continue to monitor the program and provide feedback to the Safety Committee.