

# BUYER



*What to look for  
when you hire  
a school security consultant*

# BEWARE

**A**s an administrator or school board member, could you make these mistakes? You bypass proposals from a number of well-established school safety consultants and accept a “free” security assessment from a security equipment vendor. The vendor has no school experience and recommends only that you purchase \$500,000 worth of new security equipment, which it, coincidentally, sells.

Unlikely? How about this? Your district gives thousands of dollars to a firm that promises to “certify” your school resource officers but discovers later that the “certification” holds no real standing in the school policing field and that the trainers have done little work with schools.

Or this? You hire a “nonprofit” organization to evaluate your district’s security needs. Later, you learn—perhaps through the local newspaper—that the group is being investigated for so-



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been sincere in their responses, but many have become targets for exploitation by a growing number of overnight experts, product vendors, and organizations claiming to be *the* school security experts with *the* solution to school safety needs.

Hiring a poorly selected, unqualified school safety consultant can actually *increase* safety risks. And spending money for unnecessary security equipment or for staff training that provides inaccurate information wastes limited school funds. In addition, your district could face greater liability if a legal challenge is made against a questionable safety program.

### Why hire a consultant?

Most educators have little, if any, specialized experience or training in school security, so schools typically look to outside sources to evaluate existing safety programs and identify areas for improvement. Boards and administrators often ask outside consultants to evaluate school safety planning, programs, and needs—at the district or building level. Consultants might be asked to conduct training programs for students, teachers, school support and security staff, and others. Or they might help create entire security programs, crisis-preparedness guidelines, and security policies.

Boards and administrators typically hire consultants to evaluate security equipment use and purchasing needs, provide technical assistance after a crisis, advise districts on designing facilities for crime prevention, and furnish expert support services in cases of insurance claims and lawsuits.

Increasingly, too, school leaders seek outside support in linking school safety to levy and bond issues, community education and public relations programs, and other school-community outreach initiatives.

Whom can a district turn to? The International Association of Professional Security Consultants (<http://www.iapsc.org>) identifies four primary categories of security consultants: trainers and educators, management consultants, technology and equipment specialists, and expert witness and litigation support consultants.

Although some security consultants have strengths in more than one category, it is unusual to find someone who is equally strong in all four. For example, a consultant might be an excellent trainer and offer superb advice on designing security policies but know little about the latest state-of-the-art access-control equipment. There are also relatively few school safety consultants with extensive experience working with K-12 educators nationwide—particularly ones who were working in this field before the recent school shootings. Many self-proclaimed school security consultants have had distinguished careers in other fields—such as general law enforcement, military

liciting illegal tax-deductible contributions and has filed for bankruptcy.

These situations might appear unlikely, but there is an increasing chance that they could occur in school districts across the nation. Ever since the highly publicized rash of violent school tragedies a few years ago, parents, staff, and the media have been pressuring school officials to have school safety and crisis plans in place. Boards and administrators have typically

# TO ARM OR NOT TO ARM?



SHOULD WE ARM SCHOOL POLICE OFFICERS? Would it make our children safer?

These are controversial questions, especially in light of the violent incidents that have plagued many schools in recent years. As districts across the country consider ways to increase school security, the issue of arming school police is provoking an increasing number of political and philosophical debates.

We believe police officers need to carry firearms, whether they are walking the streets or working in the public schools. But before we give our reasons—and dispel some myths about arming school police—let’s identify the different types of staffing models for school security. Note that schools sometimes have more than one of these models in place.

- **School Resource Officers (SROs)**—These are typically certified peace officers employed by local or county law enforcement agencies and assigned to a particular school or schools. Their functions generally are based upon the “triad model,” consisting of law enforcement, student counseling, and law-related education duties.

- **School Police Officers**—These are also certified peace officers, but unlike SROs, they are typically full-time employees of the school district. Their functions may be similar, if not identical, to those of the SRO.

- **School Security Staff**—School security personnel are typically civilian, non-police support personnel without police powers. They provide enhanced campus supervision, assist with disruptive students, monitor visitors, coordinate with law enforcement officials, develop crisis plans, and help with a host of other safe schools functions. Schools may also employ contracted security personnel from private security agencies, usually for special events.

## Arming the force

Unlike civilian security staff, school resource officers and school police officers are generally defined as peace officers by state laws. These laws identify the mandatory training and certification needed for a peace officer to be commissioned with full arrest powers and the authority to carry a firearm.

A firearm is a standard tool of the trade for a trained, certified peace officer. Removing this tool lowers the standard and places students, staff, the officer, and others at higher risk should they encounter a life-threatening situation that

could be prevented or neutralized by an armed officer. The school district will likely face greater liability for lowering this standard, especially since this position conflicts with most law enforcement department policies addressing standard officer equipment.

We advise boards and administrators, in general, to authorize the arming of trained and certified peace officers who are legally qualified to carry firearms. Civilian school support personnel performing security-related functions typically should remain unarmed since they are usually not recognized under the law as peace officers.

## Myths about armed officers

Although this rationale appears straightforward, we’ve heard a number of illogical arguments against arming school police. Here are five common misconceptions:

- **Having guns in school reinforces the violence we are trying to prevent.** Officers do not carry firearms to create violence—the weapons are standard equipment. The vast majority of officers complete their entire careers without shooting anyone, and many have never even had to pull out their guns.

- **An armed officer in school scares children and creates a prisonlike environment.** Ironically, many adults feel this way about armed officers in school but accept them at banks and malls without making similar comparisons. Children aren’t scared by armed officers when they see them in their neighborhoods or in special community-policing programs. Most children expect police officers to be armed.

- **Arming an officer will lead to accidental shootings or the gun being taken from the officer.** Most police officers are trained in retaining their weapons. The possibility that someone will disarm them is in the forefront of their minds for their safety and the safety of others. This is especially true of officers who work around children.

- **There has never been an incident in our school requiring the actions of an armed officer, so we don’t need one now.** Schools reflect our broader society. Crime and violence are generally foreseeable in our broader society, and therefore, in our schools. In fact, there have been incidents where SROs have had to pull their firearms when a threat of imminent danger was posed to students and staff. These threats were neutralized and injury was prevented. Simply because such an incident hasn’t happened in your



district doesn't mean it won't. An on-site police officer must be adequately equipped to prevent, or to respond to, a life-threatening situation.

■ **Arming a school police officer will result in a greater risk of lawsuits.** Actually, the reverse is true. School officials are increasingly under scrutiny for claims of inadequate security. They could face greater liability if they intentionally try to disarm qualified peace officers. If district officials know they need armed officers and don't follow through, they might also face allegations of "deliberate indifference."

School officials are already defending legal and public opinion challenges to responses to school tragedies that *included* armed officers. It would be nearly impossible to defend a policy forbidding qualified officers from carrying a firearm while working on campus. In one recent challenge, for example, it is being alleged that a school police officer wasn't wearing his prescription glasses during a student shooting. What would the challenges be had he been unarmed?

### The bottom line

Decisions about arming school police must be based on professional industry standards and concrete program evaluations, not on the outcome of public opinion polls and political pressures. Evaluations should focus on ensuring that armed officers operate under professionally managed conditions. When completing your security plan, you should consider such issues as officer recruitment and selection procedures; job descriptions, duties, and roles in the school; methods of supervision and evaluation; firearms training; and ways to effectively manage school police and security departments.

In addition, the National Association of School Resource Officers strongly recommends specialized training beyond police academy and department in-service sessions for *any* officer assigned to a school campus.

Carrying a firearm does not automatically make an officer more effective in dealing with violence or the threat of violence, but the fact remains that it is a standard tool of the trade. The decision to disarm a qualified officer generally lowers the law enforcement standard and places students and others at higher risk. As a result, the exposure to liability could increase both for the district and for those who made that decision.—C.L. and K.S.T.

security, or corporate security—but more-qualified school security experts tend to have specific experience with schools and youth violence prevention.

### What to look out for

Nationwide, board members, superintendents, and principals are becoming targets of an increasing number of sales pitches for school safety products and services. To be sure, there are many respected school security consultants, security product vendors, and professional associations with school safety expertise and credibility. Unfortunately, however, there are also prospective safety consultants and vendors using dubious sales schemes and misrepresenting their expertise, so it pays to be an educated consumer.

We've been monitoring press releases and sales campaigns nationwide and have been approached by a number of organizations seeking to, as one person put it, "pierce the school safety market." Here are some common sales ploys we advise you to look out for:

■ **Strategic alliances.** Companies that offer related, but not identical, products and services to a particular market might form umbrella organizations in which the relationships are clear or less visible to prospective buyers. We've seen a number of alliances attempted by organizations with little, if any, long-term school safety experience. These alliances might look attractive because of their apparent "all encompassing" expertise, but be sure you know what services or products you're buying. Even if you hire only one member company of an alliance, the hired firm might have agreements and obligations to steer additional business toward other alliance companies through its consulting advice, recommendations, and technical assistance.

For example, one firm from a strategic alliance could specialize in conducting school security assessments. Although the company does not sell security equipment, another firm in the alliance might do so. Ask yourself: Is it likely that the assessment firm will make recommendations that include purchasing security equipment "coincidentally" sold by its alliance partner? If so, would you feel more comfortable working with an independent assessment consultant who has no strings attached to other product providers?

■ **Questionable "nonprofit" organizations.** An increasing number of groups that call themselves nonprofits appear to be little more than consulting firms in disguise. By claiming nonprofit status, however, they might appeal to people who believe that nonprofit organizations are automatically more credible and less likely to be profit driven. The profits might not be designated directly in the name of the organization's managers—they might simply receive them under the guise of a "salary increase" that changes each year based on the "nonprofit's" changing income.

There are many legitimate nonprofit groups, of course. But we advise you to investigate organizations by closely scrutinizing their history, mission, organization, and affiliations. If necessary, ask for evidence of their incorporation as nonprofit.

its, lists of their boards of trustees, and even copies of their IRS 990 tax returns, which they must provide if they are indeed nonprofit organizations.

■ **Centers, institutes, and research organizations.** A similar ploy is the use of words like “center,” “institute,” or “research.” Of course, there are also legitimate research centers and institutes, but some consulting entities are misusing these words to try to make a “soft sell” of their services and products to school districts. Again, it’s wise to investigate the extent of the research actually conducted by such organizations to see if the words “center” or “institute” really mean what they say.

■ **Free assessments.** Equipment vendors and individuals with little or no school safety consulting experience have also targeted school districts by offering “free” assessment services. Some civic-minded companies simply want to help schools, but there are also opportunists seeking to get a foot in the door of one school district to build their resumes and use the experience as leverage for contracting with other districts. Some might also offer free assessment services that result in recommendations for large expenditures for products that they also happen to sell.

Avoid the temptation to jump at any offer simply because it contains the word “free.” Even if there are no up-front costs for services, the costs to your district’s credibility and potential liability in the long run might be greater than if you had paid a reasonable price for professional services.

■ **Bargain-basement prices.** We’ve also seen individuals and small companies try to use cheap pricing as a method for gaining access to the school safety market. This approach is particularly attractive to people on the fringe of the school safety field, such as law enforcement officers whose regular duties have little to do with school policing but who are seeking part-time employment as consultants. This approach also works well for people using consulting as retirement income, or those wishing to test the waters of a possible permanent consulting job by building a reputation on part-time work.

These offers might seem attractive when compared to costs of similar services by larger regional or national firms. But be sure you are getting high-quality service from people with established knowledge and experience in school safety. In the end, the old saying “You get what you pay for” might very well apply.

■ **The widget approach.** Many corporations that provide school services in other fields have looked into creating new corporate divisions to address school safety. Their interests appear largely geared toward offering “canned” school security services while concentrating on continuing their primary services and products. Don’t be fooled: Slick promotional materials are no guarantee a company has school security experience.

In fact, large corporations often view security from the perspective of corporate security, which generally emphasizes protecting physical assets and using equipment to monitor corporate offices, warehouses, and other business facilities. As one company representative told us, “We don’t want to get involved

in anything to do with student behavior. We just want to sell our products in the school market.”

■ **Industry standards.** Several companies suggest that they are defining industry standards in the school safety and school policing fields. We advise exercising real caution in dealing with any organizations that make such claims. Are they indeed established leaders in their field? Your district could open itself to litigation if you follow “standards” that turn out to have questionable credibility.

■ **Special events and gimmicks.** Be sure to monitor special events that focus on school security and find out who’s really behind them. Unfortunately, free speakers and seminars, student contests, and other activities that appear legitimate on the surface might be public relations efforts by organizations that lack credibility in the school safety field.

### Making a choice

Such ploys as these might be dismissed as just good marketing, but when the stakes are as high as students’ safety, it’s crucial for school leaders to be wise consumers of security services. If your district is looking for a security consultant, remember that law enforcement or security experience in a nonschool setting is not the same as expertise in school security and school policing.

Consultants should have firsthand, practical K-12 experience over a period of time, and especially before the recent national tragedies. That experience should include full-time responsibility working with safety, security, and crisis preparedness in K-12 schools and dealing with issues concerning violent and delinquent youth in these settings.

Likewise, academic and research experience alone does not necessarily equate to practical school safety knowledge and consulting expertise. It’s important to investigate the backgrounds, credentials, references, and track record of all school safety organizations and consultants before you agree to work with them.

If you’re purchasing security related products as well as services, be sure they’re suitable for schools. Know in advance what safety threats the equipment will be used to address, how the equipment will be set up, and how it will be repaired and maintained.

Finally, it’s a good idea to examine school policies, regulations, and procedures to make sure the elements are in place to safeguard your schools—and students. To do any less is to tarnish your district’s credibility at a time when school safety is a major community concern.

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