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Breaking and Entering

Vandalism comes with a hefty price tag, but damage to buildings can be limited or even prevented if you put energy and thought into countermeasures

Del Stover

When Charles Ramsey arrived at Nystrom Elementary School to review the damage caused by vandals the previous night, he was horrified by what he saw. The floor of the California school's new multipurpose building

was a lake of water. Paint and epoxy were splattered over walls and other surfaces. Dozens of windows were shattered.

Damage was estimated at \$1 million. "The water was six inches high. The whole building was flooded," says Ramsey, board president for the West Contra Costa Unified School District. "I was stunned at the level of damage, and that an individual—or individuals—would want to do that to a school for young kids."

It took six months to repair the damage and, to this day, no one has been arrested for this malicious act of vandalism. But, for Ramsey, one of the most difficult challenges for the staff was trying to explain to young children why their school had been attacked.

"It was very hard for them to take," Ramsey says. "They felt like someone was making a statement to them. We were dealing with kids coming from some of the most difficult of economic situations in our community. Nothing had gone well for them in their life. This vandalism, what message did that send them?"

It wasn't a positive one, that's certain. How could it be anything else? School vandalism is a senseless act that security experts say often is motivated by adolescent—and, occasionally, adult—anger, frustration, vindictiveness, or just plain stu-

pidity. It can be as innocuous as a student scribbling a bit of graffiti on a restroom wall or as shocking as an all-night rampage that leaves a school unusable for days or weeks and costs hundreds of thousands of dollars to repair.

Thankfully, devastating acts of vandalism are relatively rare, but not as rare as educators might wish. The more common deeds—graffiti, broken windows, damaged desks, and the like—are an everyday affliction, a problem found everywhere from affluent suburbs to isolated rural communities to gang-plagued neighborhoods in inner cities. One study tallied nearly 100,000 acts of vandalism in a single year, but researchers suggested the figure was low, saying many lesser incidents went unreported.

Putting an accurate price tag on this damage also proved problematic, although it was clear the cost to public education runs into the hundreds of millions of dollars in repairs, staff time, and higher insurance rates.

Technology's virtues and limits

Some districts are fortunate. Vandalism is only an occasional nuisance in the schools. But while reassuring, it's no reason to be complacent. South Carolina's Orangeburg Consolidated School District had experienced only a few minor incidents in recent years, so officials were shocked this spring when two students broke into a high school and smashed windows, ripped surveillance cameras from walls, and stole electronic equipment. Damage was estimated at more than \$10,000.

Meanwhile, school officials in larger, urban districts confront an almost-daily assault against their campuses. In Flint, Mich., the district reportedly has spent more than \$1 million in recent years battling thieves and vandals who target city schools.

And it's not just adolescents smashing windows or scrawling graffiti on walls that confound authorities. As the econom-

ically troubled city's population has declined and more buildings have been left vacant, thieves have stripped them of copper piping, windows, and other items to sell as scrap.

Whatever the problem's scale, strategies to fend off such attacks are well established—and constantly improving—as new technologies are put in place. Indeed, technology has become a key first line of defense. Security cameras are

increasingly prevalent, as are door and window alarms, motion detectors, and other electronic sensors.

These are valuable tools, but school security experts say district leaders must understand technology's limits when contemplating costly purchases. When vandals entered the bus yard of Michigan's West Bloomfield School District last winter, surveillance cameras provided school officials with 35 minutes of video showing vandals ripping wires from batteries and letting air out of tires. But the footage did nothing to help officials respond in time to stop the vandalism, and the identity of the perpetrators could not be determined.

A few things to consider

- It doesn't take long for minor acts of vandalism to put a dent in the district budget. Based on federal data, Rick Phillips, founder and executive director of Community Matters, once estimated that the average cost of repairing an act of vandalism is about \$400 when staff time is added to the district's response. If a school suffers a single incident a week during the school year—a bit of graffiti, a broken window, and the occasional more-serious incident—the year-end total can amount to \$15,000 or more.

- Schools with an “oppressive” style of dealing with students—and where students feel schools are impersonal or unresponsive to their needs—are likely to face a more serious problem with vandalism, reports the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing. Schools that work to build a healthy school environment are less vulnerable to vandalism.

- The level of nighttime lighting at a school that works best to deter vandals is a question that remains unanswered. Some argue that a well-lit campus makes suspicious activity easier to spot, but others say a “lights out” policy makes it difficult for intruders to break into a building, and vandals risk bringing attention to their presence if they turn on lights or use flashlights.

- Not all vandals are current students. Former students, ex-employees with axes to grind, and adults with malicious minds also have struck at schools. At California's Nystrom Elementary School, authorities looked seriously at disgruntled employees as possible suspects because the extent of the damage required some knowledge of alarm and heating systems.

- Although uncommon, one approach used by rural school districts to deter vandals is to hire a “school sitter,” an adult who is provided a mobile home or other housing on an isolated campus in return for providing security in off-school hours.

- Prosecution and other severe disciplinary measures may be appropriate for serious acts of vandalism, but it makes little sense to escalate matters for a student who scribbles on a desk, say school security experts. Making students paint over graffiti or make restitution, along with the intervention of a school counselor, may prove more successful with students who are simply guilty of bad judgment. Put thought, experts say, into any disciplinary response.

Frustration with technology was equally high for officials at Coronado High School in Henderson, Nev., where four hooded figures scaled the wall enclosing the high school's courtyard, cut down four trees, put industrial glue in door locks, and used a mural of the school mascot for paintball gun practice. According to authorities, the vandals appeared to know the location of security cameras and dodged their view as much as possible.

Such examples aren't meant to suggest security cameras are of no use. They are a deterrent and, as experts note, adolescents aren't always smart. School officials and police have identified more than a few vandals through surveillance video. What's more, students—for all their alleged tech-savvy ways—seem to run afoul of alarms quite frequently.

That was true at Orangeburg Consolidated School District's Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School. There, the vandals' five-hour spree of destruction was brought up short when they began playing with fire extinguishers—and set off fire alarms that sent them running before firefighters arrived. By morning, however, investigators had reviewed surveillance video, talked to students who'd seen two juveniles hanging around the school the night before, and made two arrests. The county's sheriff boasted, “It took the vandals longer to destroy the school than it took us to identify and take them into custody.”

Defense in depth

So the lesson is clear: Although invaluable, alarms and cameras are not sufficient by themselves to protect a school from vandals. Much more is needed: in essence, several lines of defense.

“School leaders must combine technology with multiple other strategies ... Any single strategy alone will not work,” says Ken Trump, president of a Cleveland, Ohio-based security consulting firm. “A comprehensive program of education, prevention, technology, enforcement, school-community relations, and associated measures must be taken to effectively address vandalism.”

One of the most accepted measures is based on the “broken windows theory” that signs of vandalism, such as broken windows or graffiti, should be dealt with immediately. Vandalism left unattended simply invites more vandalism, Trump says. “A clean, well-maintained facility sends a strong message to stu-

dents that they are valued, as well as [sends] a message to vandals that members of the school community will not tolerate vandalism.”

School officials are making this response easier for themselves with savvy decisions on equipment and material purchases. Toughened glass, fire-retardant paint, and graffiti-resistant coatings on doors, walls, and bathroom stalls can stymie vandals. Concrete outdoor furniture, stainless steel mirrors in restrooms, and the use of darker colors on walls also can limit vandalism.

This thinking also is influencing some school architects, who are incorporating a concept known as “crime prevention through environmental design” in renovation and new construction projects. To improve security, delivery docks and exterior doors are located so would-be intruders are more visible if they try to force open doors. Restrooms are placed in high-traffic areas, and their entrances are designed without doors. New school designs seek to improve adults’ line-of-sight down hallways and to remove hidden alcoves under stairwells.

Perhaps the most effective defense against vandalism, however, focuses not on things, but on people, says Rick Phillips, founder and executive director of Community Matters, a non-profit organization that helps educators create a healthy school climate. Many vandals, research shows, are disengaged or disenchanting students. They lack positive relationships with teachers or fellow students, are doing poorly academically, and feel no loyalty or sense of ownership for their school.

Students who feel connected to school “are less likely to do harm to themselves, others, or their environment. Students don’t vandalize a building where there are adults who care about them,” says Phillips.

Some school leaders may see this argument as a touchy-feely, feel-good approach—a nice idea but one in which the practical impact is suspect, Phillips says. But he insists that it’s a cost-effective strategy to build a sense of connectedness among students and adults. “It’s all about the bottom line. Focusing on school climate is the best strategy to reduce your costs and get the results you want.”

Setting priorities

More school districts are embracing the Community Matters approach. In Orangeburg, school officials have launched a new Bootstraps Mentoring Foundation with community and faith-based groups, with the goal of pairing students with caring adults. Although the program’s goal is to help students succeed educationally, says district spokesman Greg Carson, school officials are aware of the initiative’s potential to reduce the number of angry, disengaged students.

“You can take all the preventive measures you can ... have all the alarm systems and all that,” he says. “But until you address what may be lacking in the lives of these students and help them not to make mistakes, you’re spending your efforts on responding to [acts of vandalism] after they’re committed.

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You’ve got to address matters on the front end.”

Carson says the district has found that showing a student that he’s cared about “goes a long way to alleviating any little criminal problem you might have.”

At the same time, school leaders should be certain to get the message out about their expectations, Trump says. Students and parents must know the school’s policy towards vandalism, and the student code of conduct should make clear the consequences. “Students need to be educated upfront about the importance of respecting school property, and parents should also be educated on the issue.”

Meanwhile, school officials can enlist community members, particularly homeowners living near school buildings, in anti-vandalism efforts, he adds. “Principals should make personal contact at least once a year, at the beginning of each school year, with neighbors to encourage them to call police and the principal to report after-hours security concerns.”

Such strategies are making a difference in the San Diego Unified School District, says Rueben Littlejohn, the district’s chief of school police. The district has a school watch program that enlists homeowners to keep an eye on campuses, and students are encouraged to paint school-sponsored murals on walls and large surfaces that might be targeted by vandals.

Coupled with traditional security measures, ranging from cameras to increased police patrols, there have been “major improvements in this area since 2005,” he says.

On the school board’s part, the issue really is about setting priorities and making certain that good policies and procedures are in place, school security officials say. Actual strategies can be left to administrators to develop and implement. Where vandalism is a larger, more complex problem, a more comprehensive program may require a task force of administrators, teachers, police, school counselors, maintenance personnel, and others.

Any review of the problem should include collecting data to determine where vandalism is particularly active, the role of gang activity, and the vulnerability of schools.

It’s an effort all the more important as schools continue to invest in technology, Trump says. “While many forms of vandalism have, in essence, been the same for decades, damage to computers, computer accessories, and other technology is one of the newer faces of an age-old problem. In today’s world ... vandalism to new technology can cost students the loss of critical new education tools and cost schools a small fortune in repair and replacement costs.”

That’s a reality that’s not going to change, Trump and others say. But, by putting the energy and thought into countermeasures, vandalism can be limited—and school officials can keep their attention focused on the important task of student learning. ■

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