

Navigating School Safety and Lockdown Options

by Herb Bindel

Every day, schools face the potential for a wide array of violent incidents. That is why administrators, parents and the focused public are focused on school safety and lockdown options.

To stay current in the industry and provide customers and end-users with the latest in safety and security solutions, door and hardware professionals recognize the importance of offering electronic access control (EAC) systems.

When electronic access control was first introduced, it was overwhelmingly complicated. The good news is, as technology has improved, EAC systems are easier to understand and present to the architectural community and facility decision-makers.

There are a variety of electronic access control systems with lockdown capabilities on the market, along with many possible non-code compliant classroom barricade devices. It can be overwhelming for door hardware consultants and decision-makers to determine the best choice that meets the building code for life safety while also making schools more secure.

"To consult effectively as a door and hardware professional, you need to be comfortable with the system," explains Nick Ealy, technical sales specialist, access control, for Hager Companies. "The more you use it, the more you understand it and the more comfortable you get. That goes for all access control, security and lockdown systems on the market."



This is why the first step is always to educate the end-user on different approaches to enable a lockdown process - and how they affect safe egress. Take, for example, these three approaches.

1. **Unrestricted Lockdown:** A button on a wall or desk can be designed to initiate the lockdown process as soon as it is pressed. The advantage is that anyone – from principal to parent – that sees a threat can begin the lockdown process by merely pushing that button. This scenario could also be a disadvantage, as an intruder could also initiate the lockdown process by pressing the button. It is important to understand that while this type of lockdown could prevent emergency personal from entering the building, it would not stop people from egressing.
2. **Authorized Lockdown:** Only those with an authorized credential can initiate lockdown. Often this is the principal, the security team and other designated personnel. Each person has a specialized credential, such as a fob, that they present to any online access points that creates a pre-determined stream of events (as set up in the software) to initiate lockdown.
3. **Software-Enabled Lockdown:** The software is programmed to trigger a lockdown. Even the most basic electronic access control system has this feature. Still, there are ways to enhance performance, either with add-ons or integration with third-party software.

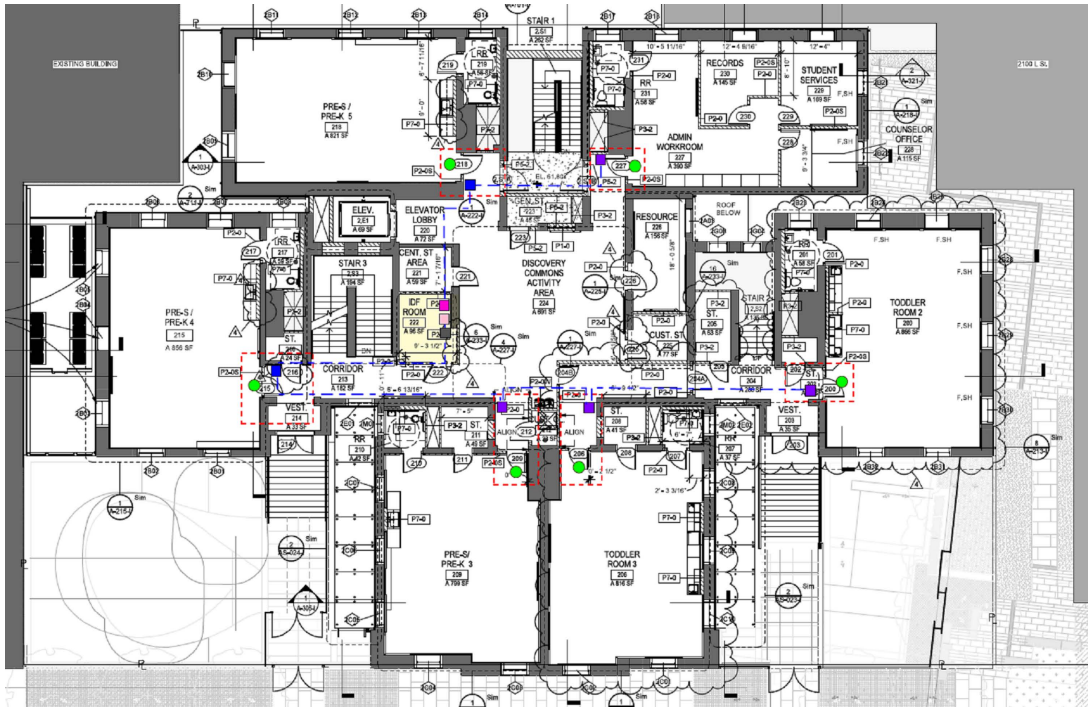
Lockdown Approaches

Every school district is widely different, from the student population to building layouts.

This means each has its own unique set of perceived threats and security needs. In our experience, a school typically approaches lockdown in one of three ways:

1. **Doors Always Locked:** Some schools are choosing to keep their classroom doors locked at all times. Procedurally, this is simple because everyone knows the doors are always locked. If using mechanical locks, it is important the school maintains security of its keys and control over the master key system. With electronic access control, an offline product can cost-effectively achieve the same results.
2. **Classroom Intruder Locks:** This lock function is available with mechanical and electronic access control. It works by allowing the teacher to lock the door from the inside of the room. Many school districts like this lockdown option because the teacher can lock the door from the classroom without having to step into the hallway. These locks also give the teacher the ability to leave the door unlocked the majority of the time, which makes the building feel more open for students.
3. **An Integrated Approach** With this electronic access control option, the locks are integrated with other security features to trigger a lockdown. For example, video cameras that detect the flash of a gunshot or audio sensors that detect the sound of a gunshot can trigger an automated action to lockdown the school. In this example, the approach could involve an immediate perimeter lockdown while adding a delay of 30 to 45 seconds before the system locks down interior doors, which gives people time to react.

These are just a few of the many options available.



Identifying the Best Option

Electronic access control gives a school facility the greatest versatility for safety and security needs, now and in the future. As the safety and security expert, the leading lockdown look like for you?"

"One action could be as simple as locking down the perimeter of the school, which blocks active credentials from entry unless they have lockdown override," Ealy suggests. "Another approach could be closing all doors with magnetic ability for someone to move from one part of the school to another. It depends on what actions the school wants to see when a lockdown is initiated."

John Acton of Mitchell Sales & Associates agrees. "In choosing the right variables for lockdown, it's important to note that schools all have different needs. Additionally, the administrators have differing opinions on how to enact a physical lockdown and when precisely to do it. The key is to help them walk through all the decisions logically so they can determine what that looks like for them."

A distributor in Texas takes the approach of selling the full electronic access control software package to each of their clients, including modules that may not be immediately used. "This works well for them because the schools want assurances that as their needs change, they can implement nearly any new lockdown protocol without upgrading the software," Ealy explains.

Mike Stefani of Integrity Architectural Solutions notes that most of the school district end-users they consult with are smaller with 10 or fewer buildings. However, they are in a high-growth area and will be expanding in the next three to five years.

"If these schools don't have access control yet, we start by educating them on the basics and focusing on locking down the exteriors," Stefani says. "We've seen that once they become comfortable with the basics of electronic access control, and when they get more funding to expand security, they turn to us for their needs."

Because of the rapid advancement of technology, nearly any lockdown scenario is possible. That means if a client wants a complex series of events to happen to enable lockdown, it can probably happen.

Stefani has a project that currently involves 3,000 locks. The client expressed the importance of having the system correspond with the bell schedule. The locksets on the classroom doors unlock when the period ends and automatically lock again when a new period begins.

"When a school is willing to analyze their current structure and identify their potential security flaws, they will also gain an understanding of the level of security they need to keep their kids and staff safe," says Ealy.

Door and hardware professionals have the opportunity to educate the channel, from the architect to the general contractor and end-user. Starting the conversation early in the new build or retrofit process is essential.

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