

Grossmont Union High School District Taking Secure Measures in the Wake of Tragedy

No school district should ever experience the violence, terror, and shock of an on-campus shooting. And certainly, no school district should ever suffer a second shooting—only weeks after the first. Sadly, that’s what happened to the Grossmont Union High School District in March of 2001, when it became the first district in the United States to have two shootings at its high schools.

These tragic incidents, which occurred just 17 days apart, left the district and the community reeling—and searching for answers. “We always felt that our schools were sanctuaries, and we’ve discovered that, in fact, we suffer the same shocking events that happen in the rest of the community,” says Dr. Granger B. Ward, who was superintendent of the Grossmont Union High School District during the incidents. “And we have to address that and be better prepared.”

Security Challenges

Located in La Mesa, California, east of San Diego, the Grossmont Union High School District is made up of 11 high schools, with 24,000 students taught by 1,200 teachers. An additional 20,000

students attend the district’s regional occupational programs. Grossmont also has a strong adult education program, with some 35,000 students. The district is one of the largest in California.

Like most school districts across the United States, Grossmont immediately stepped up its security measures after the shootings at Columbine High School. “Making sure our kids are safe is a number-one priority for us,” emphasizes Ward. “We had agreements with the Sheriff’s Department and local law enforcement to have officers on campuses part time. We also brought in campus supervisors, adults who monitor the activities of students and people coming onto campus. We talked to kids in their classes about warning us if they hear any student talking about doing something harmful.”

The district worked with local law enforcement to develop site and contingency plans for an emergency. “We were prepared in the sense that our staff knew what to do,” explains Ward. “There was an emergency plan in place, getting kids out of the hallway, getting into the rooms, locking down the campus. We had run through all of those drills, but like any drill, you do it, never thinking it’ll be real at some point.”





The Shootings

No drill could have fully prepared the district for the events of March 5, 2001. That day, a student at Santana High School pulled out a .22 caliber gun, and began firing at students during the passing period. Two students were killed and 13 were wounded before local law enforcement apprehended the gunman.

“Any school shooting is a total surprise to any community,” states Ward. “These shootings historically happen in suburban districts like ours, not urban districts. But you still don’t expect it. We were in total shock that any student would come onto a campus with a weapon and take lives. And we were doubly shocked when it happened again less than three weeks later.”

Only 17 days later, on March 21, a student, wielding a shotgun and a pistol, opened fire on the students at Granite Hills High School. This assailant was taken into custody by police only 90 seconds later. Although eight people were wounded, this time, there were no fatalities.

“When the radio begins to crackle of another shooting that has occurred, you’re almost in disbelief,” exclaims James R. Davis, Chief of Police. You say, ‘how does this happen twice in a very good high school district with a lot of good people and concerned parents?’”

The District Responds

In the days and weeks immediately after the shootings, Grossmont’s teachers, staff, and students struggled to cope with the resulting shock and grief. “We suspended our normal jobs, and moved into a support role,” recalls Warren Williams, the district’s assistant superintendent for Information and Technology Services. “The press was everywhere, and teachers had a hard time working on campus.”

To prevent such tragic events from happening again—and to improve response time if they did—the district searched long and hard for solutions. A “Lessons Commission” of community leaders was formed, and it recommended improved surveillance and

connecting students to parents. “Our police department, along with the sheriff’s department and another police department, worked together on a joint recommendation to the school district for security technology, including video surveillance,” adds Davis.

Two years earlier, the district had upgraded to a Cisco IP-based converged network. Now, Williams, Ward, and other district personnel decided that an IP video monitoring system should be installed to run over this network. The district chose Sony’s IP-based video surveillance system to run over their Cisco converged network. “IP video gives the school and district office direct, instantaneous access to what’s going on at a campus, plus the ability to review what has happened,” says Ward.

The video images are obtained by Sony cameras, which can look over a large area in static mode, or pan, tilt, and zoom into smaller areas if needed. “We put these cameras in strategic places so that you get a full view of the campus.” explains Williams. The cameras all connect directly to the converged network’s Cisco line-powered switches.

One important surveillance feature the district needed was for authorized personnel to be able to view the video remotely with wireless handheld devices. Sony’s solution also displays the images and controls the cameras. Sony uses an MJPEG encoder, and the video image requires a much smaller bandwidth stream,” notes Williams. “As a result, this image can be ported over our Cisco wireless technology to a PDA or cell phone, so our security personnel and police can view it.” The video resolution quality is high, so it can be seen clearly on even the smallest of screens.

Advantages of IP Video Surveillance

The IP video surveillance system will help police officers do their jobs even better in the event that another security problem occurs. “Normally, when we go into these situations, our SWAT teams have very little or no information about the location of potential suspects,” says Chief of Police James R. Davis. “If you have the ability to look at a scene or look inside a building from a remote location, that’s very helpful.”



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“With cameras on campus, a school becomes a safer place to be,” notes Williams. Ward points out that the surveillance system has been a real deterrent to graffiti, theft, and vandalism. “Staff, students, and administration all know that we can review the video of whatever happens on campus. We’ve presented the recordings as evidence to students and their families, and said, ‘Here’s the video of you in action.’ We’ve seen a dramatic decrease in property damage on our campuses, and it really gives our staff a sense that they’re being watched over and protected. We’ve also seen fewer kids getting into physical confrontations, because it’s very obvious who is the initiator. This system makes kids think twice before doing something they shouldn’t, because they’ll get caught.”

Additional Safety Through IP Telephony

Prior to the installation of the video surveillance system, the district had implemented Cisco IP telephony. “We wanted to guarantee instantaneous communication from any part of our campus or any classroom,” recalls Ward. The Cisco IP Phone system can be set up for one-button 911 emergency calls, and can be used to contact the office and pinpoint the location of a security incident. Today, every classroom has a Cisco IP Phone. And the transition to this new system was smooth and seamless. “We put in over 250 telephones in the front office, and did not have one single complaint about changing from the old telephone system to the new telephone system,” exclaims Williams.

Return on Investment

With budgets for schools being cut all over the nation, Grossmont High School District believes that technology is the way to improve the budget situation in the long run. “Investment in technology actually returns dollars back to districts so they can deliver more resources to classrooms and students,” says Williams. “A one-time investment in IP video surveillance plays out for many years in the reduction of resources that we have to dedicate to that task. On an average campus, it can be a savings of anywhere from \$50,000 to \$100,000 a year. And, if we were to extrapolate that cost savings across an entire district, that’s a tremendous saving we get to use for our students.”

Two years after its initial installation, the Cisco IP Phone system is providing a rapid return on investment. “Our older telephone system was costing us a great deal of money in maintenance and in paying for local long distance charges across our own community,” explains Williams. “We had to pay for an individual line for each classroom, plus pay for services. Now, we manage our own phone system, and there are no charges for intra-district calls. Also, we figure after four-and-a-half years, we’ll begin to make money for the district, because we’ll no longer be investing in IP telephony itself.”

Funding Solutions

How has the district obtained funds for this security technology? “We put a bond strategy together,” says Williams. “We also use E-rate extensively.”

“We’re able to fund this, not only through local funds and some state funding, but through working with corporations here in the district,” notes Ward. “These corporations include Cisco, which has been incredibly supportive of our district in trying to help us get to the highest safety and security level possible.”

Ultimately, the importance of the security system to the district, community, and local law enforcement helped ensure funding. Superintendent Ward states it best; “There is no way to put a price tag on student safety. There is no way to put a price tag on peace of mind.”

Teaming Up with Cisco

Williams and his staff have benefited from a good working relationship with Cisco, as well as a high level of product quality.

“We wanted industry standard devices that would serve the district for a long time,” he explains. “And Cisco technology itself is sound and demonstrated.” Equally important is the fact that Cisco is partnering with the district in student education. “The Cisco Networking Academy™ is nationally renowned for its ability to train students in real-world applications and get them jobs out of high school, and we wanted to bring that capacity to the district.” Finally, Cisco engineers showed that they would be there from day one—and for the long run. “Cisco brought the entire organization to bear on any implementation problems. Their engineers trained our staff to assume the responsibilities for our network, which is tremendously important to us. Cisco hasn’t disappeared to this day, even though we’re well beyond implementing their products.”

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