

Visitor Management for Schools

2014

BEST
PRACTICES

With the fear of violence on the rise, school safety is in the forefront of everyone's mind. Use this guide as a resource when creating a visitor management system at your school.



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Why is a Visitor Management System Needed?

Schools are taking many steps to increase the safety of their buildings, because making students and staff feel secure is essential to creating a healthy learning environment. Security officials agree the weakest part of any security measure comes in the form of visitors coming into school grounds during school hours. 22% of K-12 campus security officers cite the “lack of a visitor management system” a top challenge they have with their physical campus security.¹

This is no surprise since 37% of schools do not require staff to wear ID badges² and 11.5% of campuses have no identification system in place when parents are picking up students.³

Without an easily enforced visitor management policy, schools may face these common safety concerns:

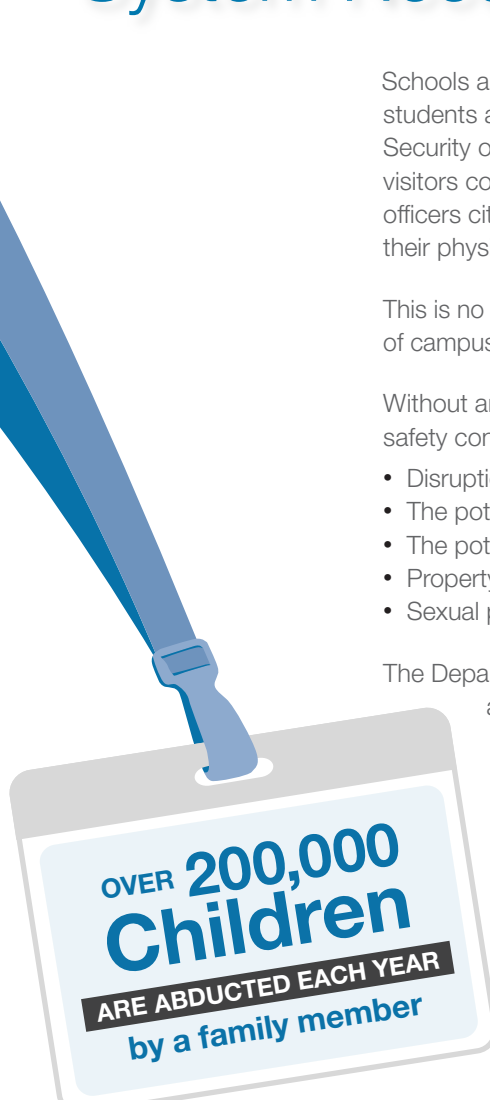
- Disruptions during class from unscheduled visitors
- The potential for child abductions
- The potential for violence
- Property theft & vandalism
- Sexual predators entering school buildings

The Department of Justice reports that over 200,000 children are abducted each year by a family member. In 78% of these cases, the child is abducted by their non-custodial parent.⁴ With high divorce rates, custody conflicts abound across the US. This puts an extra burden on schools to screen which parents have the right to remove children from campus.

Less common, but more tragic than parental abductions, is the potential of abduction by a child predator. In 2013, a young girl was abducted from a West Philadelphia elementary school when no one checked the visitor's illegible signature on the sign-in sheet against a driver's license or verified the visitor had permission to pick up the student.

A similar incident happened in 2008 when a student was abducted from a California school after a school aid assumed the student knew the visitor and did not bother to check the visitor in or ask for ID. In both cases, visitors were not required to check out when leaving, so the school had no way of stopping the abductor from leaving with a child.

Incidents like these can be limited or prevented with a clear visitor management system that requires all visitors to check in with the front office, verify their identity, wear a visitor badge, and check out at the front office when they leave. When visitors check out with the front office, they should also return the visitor badge to prevent unauthorized reentry into the building.



Visitor Management Best Practices

Based on our research and experience working with schools across the United States, we recommend a four-pronged approach to visitor management policies. These steps require all visitors to check in at the school's front office, wear a visible visitor ID badge, check out at the front office when leaving the school, and for the school to keep records of all visitors.

Visitor Check In & Authorization

CONTROLLED ENTRY: Adopting a single entry and exit strategy during school hours makes it easier for the office to monitor visitors and require them to sign in before entering the building. Notably, 92% of school campuses control access to the building during school hours, but policies are not always enforced correctly. One-third of school districts report that doors are occasionally or often propped open, negating the effectiveness of controlled entry, and 15.5% of schools report that public entrances are neither locked nor monitored.⁵

If possible, a physical barrier to force passage through the front office is recommended. All unmonitored doors should remain locked during school hours. Staff and security personnel should have access keys to use these non-monitored doors.

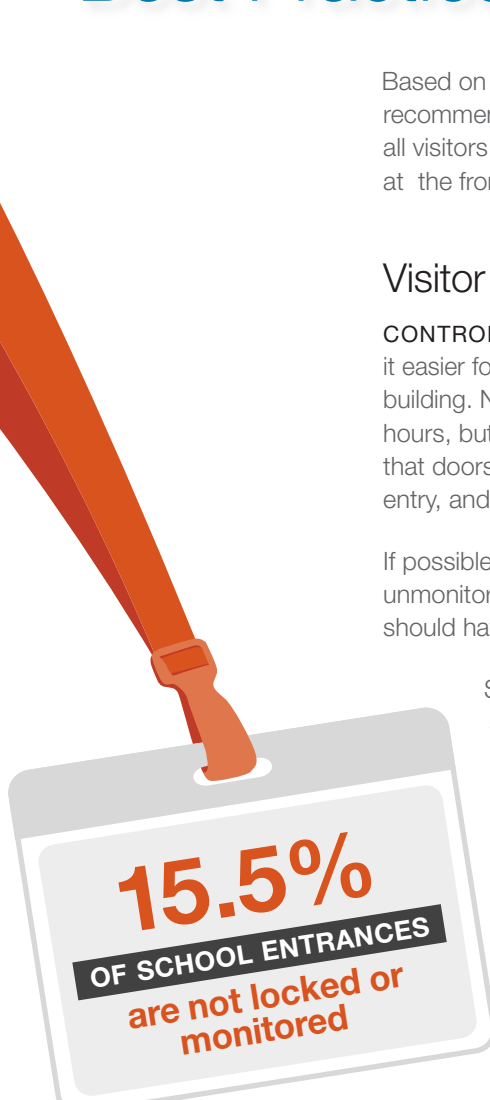
Signage is also important as part of a controlled entry, so that all visitors can clearly see the policies and direct visitors to the front office to check in.

VISITOR AUTHORIZATION: During the check-in process, visitors should state the purpose of the visit. Photo ID should be provided to verify the visitor's identity. Driver's licenses of all first time visitors should be scanned and saved in a permanent record if possible. Visitor management software is available to save records, and allows for faster check-in next time they visit since the photo ID is already on record. Signatures can also be scanned and kept on file to verify future visitors.

Some schools perform background checks on all visitors to screen for sex offenders, restraining orders, or other criminal records using an online service.

Other schools screen volunteers, but not all visitors; in this case, clear guidelines should be provided to differentiate between a visitor and a volunteer.

If background checks will be performed, policies need to be pre-set to determine how to deal with parents who have flags in the system. Using visitor management software will allow schools to record which visitors have already been screened to save time on future visits.



Visitor Checkout

Requiring visitors to check out upon departure is important for campus security:

- You know who is still in the building
- Prevents unauthorized student removal
- Prevents visitor badges from being removed or reused

To enforce visitor check out, we recommend holding the driver's licenses of all visitors during their visit to ensure they check out at the office when leaving. After a visitor checks in, a visitor badge will be provided in exchange for a driver's license or photo ID. The driver's license should be returned to the visitor in exchange for their visitor badge upon departure.

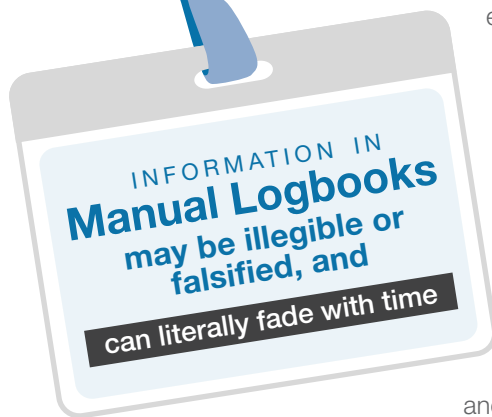
Visitor Records

Accurate visitor records can play a vital role in investigating and resolving any incidents that may occur on school grounds. In an emergency, school administrators should be able to quickly know who is in the building and provide details of current and past visitors to emergency workers. 27% of school campus security officer's cite "reaching visitors during an emergency" as the top challenge experienced with the emergency notification system.⁶

Manual Logs

Manual handwritten log-books have long been the standard process in schools. With advances in technology, however, it is no longer recommended to rely on these manual systems.

Information in manual logbooks may be illegible or falsified, and manual logbooks expose current & recent visitor information. Manual logs also tend to get lost and can literally fade with time, so accurate historical records are difficult to maintain.



Software-based Visitor Management Systems

Software-based visitor management systems are quickly becoming the new standard for campuses across the country. Visitor management software is used both for printing visitor badges and managing the visitor database.

Software makes it easy to enter visitor information with pre-designed data fields, and will automatically store visitor information in a database.

The database is generally customizable, so in addition to a person's name and visit history, you can keep other information including photo or driver's license scans, background check data, volunteer status, and details about custodial status and authorization to remove students from campus.

Since visitor information is stored for future visits, checking-in repeat visitors is quick and easy. Printing barcodes on visitor badges can also speed up visitor flow since you can quickly pull up visitor information by scanning the barcode with a handheld scanner when visitors are checked-in and out.

If your school already has an ID card system with a printer and design software, it's easy to incorporate visitor management software and badge printing into your system.

Visitor & Staff Badges

To easily identify unauthorized visitors, all adults on campus should wear badges, not just visitors. Any visitor without a badge should be immediately stopped and escorted to the office to check in.

To make enforcement easy and fun, some schools have set up a reward program for students who report adults without badges to a teacher. This almost always results in the quick identification of unauthorized visitors.



Visitor Badges

GENERIC RE-USABLE PASSES: These durable re-usable badges identify a visitor but don't contain specific information including visitor name or date of visit. Generic re-usable visitor passes are less secure and not recommended for school environments since they can more easily be taken home and re-used later for an unauthorized reentry.



HANDWRITTEN ADHESIVE BADGES: This is the easiest and least expensive form of visitor badges to implement since it involves manually writing visitor information on a peel and stick "visitor" badge. No software is required to make the badges, but a separate digital visitor log should be maintained. To increase security, schools can purchase special adhesive badges that visibly expire after 24 hours, preventing badges from being re-used.



PRINTED DISPOSABLE BADGES: If your school is keeping a digital record of visitors or uses visitor management software, it is easy to print visitor badges with just a few clicks. Most schools already have inkjet or laser printers at the check-in desk that can be used to print visitor badges.

Thermal printers are also a great option since they have a small footprint, are inexpensive (often under \$200), and print extremely quickly. Thermal printers also don't require any ink or toner, so the only cost to print is the labels themselves.

Printed badges come in both adhesive and clip on styles, and are also available with a time expiring feature that visually invalidates the badge after 24 hours.



DURABLE PLASTIC BADGES: The most durable visitor badge solution involves using a photo ID card printer to make visitor badges. These are the same printers that are used to make staff and student ID cards.

Since PVC visitor badges are durable, this would be a great option for volunteers or regular visitors. Some ID card printers also offer a re-writable feature that will allow you to erase and reprint on a PVC card to reduce waste.

Making PVC visitor badges requires special software to design the badge template, and manage and print visitor data. This software can also be used to store visitor information and photographs, track visitor history, and keep notes including which students they are authorized to pick up.

VISITOR BADGE DESIGN GUIDELINES: No matter which solution you use, make sure the badge clearly distinguishes a visitor as separate from staff. We recommend that every visitor pass includes at a minimum the visitor's full name and date, but you also may want to include their child's name, purpose of the visit, or destination within the school.

Staff Badges

It is critical for staff members to display badges at all times in order to quickly identify unauthorized visitors. This is an easy policy to implement since most schools already provide staff photo ID cards, however 37% of schools do not require staff to wear ID badges.⁷ If all adults on campus are not required to wear visible ID badges, it becomes easier for unauthorized visitors to blend into the general staff population, weakening the effectiveness of a visitor management policy.

Best practices for staff badges include:

- All staff & regular volunteers must display photo ID badges while on campus
- Photos should be large enough to easily visually verify the cardholder
- Badges (or lanyards) should be color coded for staff type—teachers, administrators, kitchen staff, facilities, volunteers, etc.
- Badges should be reissued annually with current photos & school year
- Staff who forget badges must receive a temporary badge for the day

Staff badges should be printed using a photo ID card printer, and can be centrally produced by the school district or individually by each school. Although common practice, it is not recommended to use the school photographer to produce staff badges because the badges should be issued before the first day of school.

STAFF BADGE DESIGN GUIDELINES: Staff ID cards can vary by district, but there are some common design elements many schools use to improve visual security on school grounds:

- Large photos, making it easy to verify the cardholder is the same person in the photo
- School name and the employee's title
- School logo or crest, to verify the card is for the correct school

Other design elements or accessories may be included to make it even easier to identify people:

- Color-coordinated cards for different grades, teachers, and administrative personnel
- Color-coordinated lanyards may also be used to identify different groups, including a lanyard color for visitors
- Students and staff have plastic ID cards, while visitors get printed visitor passes
- Visitors display printed passes with a badge clip, while staff use lanyards or badge reels



Writing a Visitor Management Policy

Visitor policies are often written by the school district and later implemented by the individual schools. The level of detail given to schools in the district policy can vary greatly, leaving some schools with strict rules and others with loose guidelines. 27% of campus security officers say that their school lacks sufficient policies for building access control system, which should be the first line of defense against unauthorized intruders.⁹

Policies Should Cover

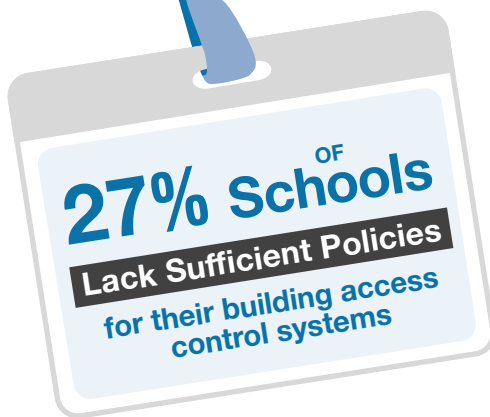
- Access control plan
- Who is allowed on campus
- Procedure for checking in & checking out
- Steps to authorize visitors
- Badge requirements for staff & visitors
- How to deal with unauthorized visitors

A copy of the visitor policy should be distributed to students, staff, and volunteers so they know to look for visitor badges on strangers in the building and how to react if someone is not wearing a badge.

Questions to Consider when Writing a Visitor Management Policy

When you're writing or updated a visitor management policy, it's easier to answer questions now and not deal with larger security problems later. Consider things like:

- Will only custodial parents be allowed contact with the students during school hours?
- Will your school allow parents or visitors with criminal records into the building?
- Do parents need pre-approved appointments to see students or teachers during the day?
- When a visitor arrives to pick up a student, can they go to the classroom to pick up the child or do you require them to wait in the office?
- Are maintenance people, law enforcement, and long-term volunteers required to check-in with the office?



Costs to Implement a Visitor Management System

The costs to implement a visitor management system will vary widely depending on badge choices, software choices, visitor screening services, and the administrative costs associated with publishing and communicating the new policies.

While budgeting can seem like a significant hurdle, there are low cost options available and starting small is better than doing nothing at all.



Medium Cost

Staff Badges

Complete staff ID badge systems include an ID card printer, software, camera and supplies. The cost of a complete system ranges from \$895 to \$3,000 depending on your ID needs. The incremental cost to print each card is usually in the \$0.30 to \$1.00 range.

Features that will increase the cost of the printer and card supplies include dual-sided printing, magnetic stripe encoding and access card encoding. Card printing can be centralized at the district level to reduce overall cost, but having systems at each school may be more practical to quickly replace lost or stolen cards or add students and staff midway through the year. These systems can also be used to print student and visitor badges.

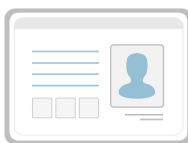
Instead of purchasing an ID system, some school districts rely on school photographers to provide staff IDs, which is not recommended because staff IDs should be issued before the start of each school year. Ordering custom IDs from printing services is another option, but these services can become expensive and time consuming if you need to frequently replace or issue new cards after the start of the school year.



Low Cost

Visitor Badges

The cost of visitor badges depends on the type of badges chosen. Visitor badges can be handwritten or printed on a standard inkjet or laser printer, thermal printer, or ID card printer. Generally the cost ranges from \$.20 to \$1.00 per badge excluding the initial cost of the printer.



Medium-High Cost

Visitor Management Software

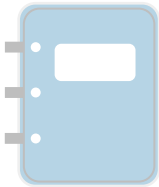
Visitor management software is used to design, manage, and print visitor and staff badges. The software is also used to track visitor information and create a visitor log. Complete visitor management systems include software, but software can also be purchased separately if you already own a printer. Software usually ranges from \$800 to \$2,000 per license depending on features and functionality.



Low-Medium Cost

Background Checks

For schools that require detailed information on all visitors, background checks provide important information not found on a driver's license or other photo ID. These services can check for sex offender registrants, criminal pasts, restraining orders, and more. These services will range in price based on the amount of data your school requires.



Low Cost

Publishing Policy/Updating Handbooks/Signs

Updating visitor management policies will require some investment in new signs and printing updates to staff and student handbooks and notices. The costs of this are minimal compared to the other costs, but should be considered as part of the overall expense.



Overall Cost Estimate Ranges

A completed visitor management system can run as low as a few hundred dollars for a basic badge system up to \$5,000 for an advanced system that handles both visitor management and staff or student badges.

Your school will also have to think about non-monetary costs to creating, learning, and enforcing a new policy. How much time, and how many meetings, will your teachers and staff require to understand the new policy? How much time will the person signing in visitors need to learn the new system? How much time, if any, will the new badge process take compared to the old process?

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What are the legal requirements for a visitor management system?

A: Visitor policies will vary, depending on the school district and the state. Always check with the appropriate school or law enforcement department when planning your visitor management system to ensure you meet all safety and privacy standards.

Along with your school district's policy, your state may have requirements for keeping schools safe. For example, Florida and California require schools to perform criminal background checks on any volunteers or regular school visitors. Your school policy should always reflect state requirements.

Q: Can the visitor management system detect sex offenders, restraining orders, or other criminal records?

A: Different systems will scan different databases, depending on what your school and the software have access to. In general, after entering in the visitor's information, the system can search the available databases for any criminal records that may limit their access to the school building.

Q: How much will a new visitor management system cost?

A: The cost of a new visitor management system greatly depends on what your school needs. For example handwritten adhesive badges cost less than durable PVC cards, but may not meet your district's guidelines.

Q: Are there programs to help schools afford safety updates to buildings?

A: Some federal grants are available from the Department of Homeland Security to enhance school security.⁹ Your school district can apply for grants online at Grants.gov. Your state might also have grants available for school security improvements—California, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New York, and Virginia all offer school construction grants. Other school districts have funded new visitor management equipment through school bonds and levies.

Q: How does a visitor management policy fit into my school's overall security system?

A: Visitor management is just one of the many steps you take to keep students, staff, and teachers safe. A visitor management system makes it easy to know who is in the building at all times, which is essential for emergency situations. Visitor management policies can also help ensure that only authorized visitors have contact with students.

Q: How much support is needed to install and run a visitor management system?

A: Visitor management systems are designed to be easily installed and managed by any user. Just like a regular printer or new piece of software, there are some steps to the initial installation but the day-to-day data management and printing take only minutes.

Q: How should we tell students, staff, and parents about visitor policy changes?

A: If you updated your school's visitor policy during the summer break, you can hand out copies of the new policy at the start of the school year like you would do normally. If you update your policy during the school year, consider sending new copies home for students and parents along with a letter explaining the changes, and hold a staff meeting for all employees.

Q: How do we get students, staff, and visitors to follow a new policy?

A: The first step is educating your students, their parents, and the school staff on the new policy. Once they know the new requirements, it becomes easier to enforce it. Have your teachers and school staff model good behavior by consistently displaying their badges. Your school should also have a clear policy for what students and staff say to visitors who are not properly displaying a badge, so they know what to do in these situations.

Q: Where can we get a visitor management system?

A: You can buy complete visitor management systems, which include the printer, software, and supplies, online from ID card retailers.

About AlphaCard

AlphaCard is a leading provider of ID card printers and systems since 1998. We understand the special safety concerns that schools have. Since 1998 we've partnered with over 5,000 school districts, K-12 schools, and universities to customize secure badge systems for any need and budget.

In addition to working with schools to create custom badge systems, AlphaCard has also established AlphaCard Cares About School Safety. This program allows parents, teachers, and community members to nominate their school to receive a donation of a complete visitor management system, visitor management software, or card printing supplies.

For more information about integrating a student ID, staff ID, or visitor management system, please contact us by phone at **(800) 717-8080** or by email at sales@alphacard.com



White Paper References

- ¹ Gray, Robin Hattersley. "Survey: Campuses Struggling to Manage Their Guests." *Campus Safety Magazine*. <http://www.campussafetymagazine.com/files/CS1012-SurveyResults.pdf> (accessed October 2013).
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- ⁷ "Fast Facts: School safety and security measures." *Institute of Education Sciences*. <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=334> (accessed December 2013).
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