

## In a crisis, door locks, alerts can save lives

### Comment on this story

By JEFF JARDINE  
[jjardine@modbee.com](mailto:jjardine@modbee.com)

*Last Updated: April 22, 2007, 04:20:51 AM PDT*

They'd never had a lockdown in the 42-year existence of John F. Kennedy School in Ceres.

Still, Principal Ken Daniel felt the need to be better prepared to protect his students and staff.

So, for \$2 a month (per phone), he subscribed to a service called Push 5, by Boma Systems Inc. that enables him to communicate instantly with every teacher on campus by dialing '5' on his cell phone.

Daniel signed up for the service March 22, met with his staff that day and punched their cell phone numbers into his instant calling group.

Five days later, police chased two men in a stolen car near JFK. One was a parolee wanted by the Department of Corrections. The staff needed to rush the students, many of whom are severely disabled, indoors.

"I pushed '5' and announced we were going into a lockdown," Daniel said. "I literally closed the lid on the phone and I could see the teachers taking the kids inside."

This isn't intended as a freebie advertisement for the new security product. It merely suggests that officials such as Daniel are actively seeking ways to react more quickly when something goes wrong at or near a school.

And "react" is the key word there. Because unless specific information is available, it's virtually impossible to know when some nut case is going to show up on a school campus or anywhere else and start slaughtering people with an assault weapon.

School security is always an issue in any community, but never more so than after a massacre like the ones at Virginia Tech this week, Columbine (1999) or Stockton's Cleveland Elementary School (1989). These events raise antennae nationwide, but always in the aftermath.

They don't account for all the times when police, parents and teachers quietly work together to intervene with an unstable person to prevent a tragedy.

Teachers are obligated to report students who talk or write about committing acts of violence, and police take those reports very seriously, said Modesto police Lt. Chris Fuzie, who heads the department's youth services and works directly with the schools. Officers then consult with parents, working to get counseling for the student and to determine whether the student has access to weapons.

Friday, the police assigned additional officers to work at the schools. Why April 20?

"Hitler's birthday and the anniversary of Columbine," Fuzie said.

That might sound like a bit of a stretch until you read that the shooter at Virginia Tech viewed the Columbine killers as martyrs, Fuzie said.

"Just as everybody thinks of 9-11, we think about 4-20," he said.

Occasionally, authorities will get lucky. A campus supervisor once spotted two boys burying a gun and seized it near a school in Modesto, Fuzie said. But teachers and authorities can't be inside everyone's head at all times.

That is why the vast majority of the plans and protocols involve reaction — security plans based on what worked and what didn't in previous incidents. Once the carnage begins, they only can try to limit it.

After Columbine, police scuttled the concept of trying to surround and contain these so-called active shooters and ceased engaging in hostage negotiations. Now, Modesto police Sgt. Craig Gundlach said, the first four or five officers who arrive at the scene form a unit that immediately confronts the suspect, using whatever force is necessary to prevent further slaughter.

It's a policy that's being used statewide, if not nationwide, he said.

Police and school districts are required by law to review their security procedures annually. They conduct safety drills based on each campus' layout, said Marlin Sumpter, Modesto City Schools' director of child welfare and attendance. "Active shooter" drills were conducted Saturday at Buhach Colony, Atwater and Oakdale high schools.

"We plan for as many things as we can think of," he said. "Some aren't likely to happen, but you plan anyway because the children are placed in our care every day."

Changing times also require updating basic hardware at many campuses.

Kate McCarthy, a teacher in Modesto, points out that classroom doors in many older schools — built during a more peaceful era — cannot be locked from the inside.

"Four years ago (while at an older school), I had to hold a door shut while two intruders from the community fought outside my classroom," McCarthy wrote in an e-mail. "I had 20 first-graders in that room. Luckily, it was a neighborhood fight without weapons. We just were scared, but not hurt."

Her point is well-taken. If an assailant is already on campus, it really isn't a lockdown if a teacher can't lock a door from the inside to keep him or her out. School districts need to find ways to address that problem, including looking for grant money available through the state.

A door that can be locked by a key from the inside could make the difference, she said.

"Make sure teachers can lock the door," McCarthy said.

Fuzie said the police encourage districts to have doors that can be locked from the inside as well as to paint room numbers on the roof so helicopter pilots can identify where a problem person might be on campus.

Again, that is a reaction to an immediate crisis. But any bit of planning — better communications, locking the rooms from the inside and continually reviewing procedures — could be what limits the devastation a psycho can wreak.

To comment, click on the link with this column at [www.modbee.com](http://www.modbee.com). Jeff Jardine's column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays in Local News. He can be reached at [jjardine@modbee.com](mailto:jjardine@modbee.com) or 578-2383.