

# School Safety Monthly

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**Reducing the Risk of Sexual Violence in Schools  
Through a Focus on Space Management**



Photos: Rachel Wilson



# Reducing the Risk of Sexual Violence in Schools Through a Focus on Space Management

by Michael Dorn

One important concept for the prevention of sexual misconduct between students and for the prevention of sexual assaults in schools is known as space management. Reducing the amount of unlocked and unsupervised space in schools reduces the supervision load for staff. It also reduces the availability of private spaces available for consensual or violent sexual activity.

I have worked numerous cases where students or staff members were sexually assaulted in unlocked and unsupervised areas in elementary, middle and high schools. Instances of sexual misconduct that do not involve force or threats of force are even more common.

Here are just a few examples of actual cases we are familiar with:

- The son of a prominent minister was caught having sex with two special needs students in an unlocked closet of a magnet elementary school.
- Eight students were caught having an orgy in the stage area in an unlocked auditorium of a public high school.
- A group of students was caught having an orgy in the stage area of an unlocked auditorium in a Catholic high school.
- A white female student claimed that two African-American students forcibly raped her in an unlocked high school classroom. The media reported widely on the incident, emphasizing the race of the girl who reported being raped and race of the alleged attackers. After the police investigation raised serious concerns about the allegation, the girl admitted that she had agreed to have sex with the students.
- A young girl was raped in an unlocked closet of her elementary school by an intruder who had defeated the school's extensive

security measures.

- Two students were convicted on felony charges after they repeatedly engaged in sexual activity with multiple special needs students in an unlocked room in a gymnasium. In their statements to investigating police, numerous students referred to the room as the "sex room." The District expended more than \$1 million in legal fees alone before reaching a settlement.
- An employee's son raped an elementary student in an unlocked classroom in a Christian school after hours.
- A primary school teacher was beaten unconscious by an intruder armed with a classroom fire extinguisher, raped and sodomized in an unlocked classroom. She survived because her attacker thought he had killed her and left.
- Two students were raped by the same man in two different unlocked classrooms on two different hallways during a high school basketball game. The second attack was carried out while police were interviewing the victim of the first attack.
- Two different students were raped in rooms that had been left unlocked and unattended in the same high school about eighteen months apart.

These are just a few examples of the types of cases that have occurred in public, charter, independent and faith-based K12 schools. Many of these cases resulted in intensive negative media coverage. Some involved successful litigation against school officials and all might have been prevented through proper space management approaches. There are several simple and inexpensive approaches that can help reduce the risk of sexual misconduct and sexual assault in unlocked and unsupervised spaces.

Here are a few tips that our clients find particularly helpful:

- Make staff aware that these types of incidents are relatively common in elementary, middle and high schools.
- If you operate a non-public school, make staff aware that these types of incidents have occurred in non-public schools.
- Develop, implement, and enforce a written policy regarding the locking of classrooms, auditoriums, boiler rooms and closet doors when they are not being actively supervised by an adult. This can also prevent vandalism, sabotage, and accidents.
- Develop, implement and enforce a policy that prohibits students from being alone without adult supervision in lockable rooms.
- When renovating existing schools or designing new ones, look for ways to build natural surveillance into the design.
- Consider the benefits of installing maintenance lock sets in boiler rooms, mechanical rooms, closets and other rooms that can be difficult to keep locked when they are not in use. These locks secure automatically upon being closed and require a key to open.

No security measures are foolproof but proactive and thoughtful space management practices can reduce the risks associated with sexual misconduct of students as well as the chances that a student or staff member will be sexually assaulted in their school.

*Michael Dorn serves as the Executive Director of Safe Havens International and is a veteran campus law enforcement officer. Michael is working on his 28th book Extreme Violence – Preventing and Preparing for Active Shooter, Active Killer and Acts of Terrorism.*



# What's Wrong With This Photo?

There are a few potential issues with this photo. Assuming that there is no staff member actively using this work area, leaving this door open and/or unlocked can create the following vulnerabilities:

- A student or visitor could access the chemicals and other potentially dangerous items in this closet. There have been incidents where students accessed rat poison, unauthorized cleaning supplies and lab chemicals to use to harm other students.
- An attacker could use the privacy afforded by this space to sexually assault a staff member or student.
- A visitor or intruder could use this space to hide in and wait until after hours to commit a robbery.
- In many cases, these types of spaces also contain mechanical areas or roof access points.



Photo by Chris Dorn/Safe Havens International

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