

Card system latest security upgrade in area schools

By **ASHLEI N. STEVENS**, ashlei.stevens@shj.com

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As giggly girls and bubbly boys enjoy the sunshine during school recess, it is a common practice for teachers to prop open doors with rocks or other objects, since most schools keep their external doors locked.

But with increased concerns about safety and unwarranted visitors entering schools, Spartanburg School District 4 is taking proactive steps to ensure optimum safety. No longer will teachers at Woodruff Primary School have to prop open doors, or knock for someone to let them in; they will have a new card access system that will unlock the door after recess is over.

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According to officials with SFI Electronics, who will install the system at Woodruff Primary beginning this week, Spartanburg 4 will be the first K-12 school district in the state to implement this type of technology.

"Most K-12 schools have video cameras in them, but none of them that we're aware of have really put card access in," said Thomas Warner, branch manager for the Greenville-Spartanburg branch of SFI Electronics Inc. "Anything that makes a more safe environment - that's a plus."

Spartanburg 4 Superintendent Rallie Liston agrees.

"We always put safety as a priority, and our board is very supportive," Liston said. "We think it's not only doable, but it's the wave of the future."



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JR/ALEX.HICKS@SHJ.COM

Woodruff Primary will soon get an upgrade in safety for students. The school will install card scanners on external doors, which will allow teachers to swipe a card and gain access to locked buildings.

How it works

SFI Electronics Inc. is a 30-year-old company that provides commercial, industrial and educational digital video and card access systems. The company has eight offices throughout the Carolinas and Virginia. Many of the card access systems SFI has installed have been at businesses such as Milliken and Michelin. And many Upstate colleges, including Wofford, Clemson, and Bob Jones University, have the systems in place.

Warner said that card access systems have been used for more than 20 years, but the technology has changed. Years ago, bar codes were used to access buildings, but the downfall is that people can photocopy a bar code. Then magnetic strips were introduced, so you could "swipe" a card for entrance. Now there are proximity cards - which will be installed at Woodruff Primary. These allow the cardholder to gain access by holding the card anywhere from four to six inches away from the card reader, so the card can be read through a wallet, coat pocket or purse.

"You can program it to allow teachers with cards to get in certain hours of the day, certain days of the week," Warner said.

A computer tracking system, which will be housed at the district office, can detect how many times and at what time of the day a particular teacher or administrator tried to gain access to a building. If a teacher reports their card missing or stolen, it can be immediately deleted from the system so that no one else can use it.

This system also ensures that doors cannot be propped open. An alarm will go off at the district office to signal a propped door at Woodruff Primary.

"This will give them a lot more accountability of who comes and goes," Warner said. "Plus, it will also help people keep the doors closed, which is one of the biggest problems in most schools - you'll find the door propped open, especially near playgrounds."

Warner said the only drawback his company has noticed is what is called "tailgating," where one person has a valid card, and another non-card holder follows behind. But he said this is more of an issue on college campuses, which may bring unregistered visitors into dorms or academic buildings.

Benefits worth the cost

District 4 officials began researching the card access system about nine months ago. Facilities manager Clark Simpkins Jr. saw the system in place when he went to visit his daughter at

Clemson University. He said it will cost roughly \$24,700 to implement at Woodruff Primary, which includes the software for the tracking system.

"I think for a feeling of safety and security of teachers, students and parents, it's a small price to pay for that added security," Simpkins said.

The card access system will be ready by the start of classes this fall at the primary school, as will a new buzzer system, where visitors will have to be buzzed into the locked front doors of the school. Based on its acceptance, Liston and Simpkins said they might plan to outfit the other three schools in the district with the card access, which would cost another \$20,000. Once installed, these schools likely would also get the front entrance buzzer system.

Another technology advance is biometrics, which uses an identification of your physical person to enter a building. In Spartanburg District 1, the new Chapman and Landrum high schools have incorporated this system, where teachers enter a numerical password and the system scans their hand for entry. Chapman Principal Ron Garner said this system also has tracking features, and the school plans to expand the service to students this fall.

"In my opinion, I see no drawbacks," Garner said. "It has been outstanding for our teachers."

Myriad safety features are in place in the other Spartanburg County school districts, including video cameras and buzzer entry systems at front doors. Districts 3, 5 and 7 have keypad entry at some of their schools, which allows teachers to punch in a code to get into a locked door. However, since many keypads were built during construction of the school, Warner says some districts don't change their security number often enough, and anyone could give away the code. There's also no audit trail or reporting capability, so school officials don't know who is coming or going.

In District 6, none of the schools have keypad entries, but business and technology director Brian Calsing said his district might consider implementing the card access system at the new Fairforest Elementary School, which is scheduled to open in fall 2008.

"Everybody's looking for every screw they can turn to make sure our kids are safe," District 3 superintendent Jim Ray said.

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