

Cameras allow police to see inside Hamburg School from their cars

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Cameras around Hamburg School allow Principal Steven Engravalle and Hamburg Police to monitor the area.

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With images of the Virginia Tech shootings still fresh in their minds, Hamburg school and police officials are taking proactive steps to increase security for the borough's school children.

"The shooting, that could have happened anywhere," said Steven Engravalle, Hamburg School principal. "If, God forbid, any emergency were to occur at our building, we need to make sure we're absolutely prepared."

On Tuesday, the Hamburg Police Department had new security software installed into station computers, allowing them to see real-time surveillance video footage from the school's security cameras.

As of today, the eighth anniversary of the Columbine High School shooting, Hamburg police will be able to see those same security images from terminals inside their patrol cars.

School and police officials said this is the first example in the state of a shared surveillance security system between a school and police department.

"They have the ability to see inside the parameter of the school on their way to the scene," Engravalle said. "This way, they can develop a plan in those microseconds where safety counts and lives are at stake."

Engravalle said the system is part of a year-long, continuing process of installing and upgrading school security technology, but that the recent shootings at the Virginia Tech campus in Blacksburg, Va. reinforced the need.

"We couldn't wait any longer," he said. "It needed to get done. Monday proved it a little bit more, and put a little bit of fire under everyone."

The Hamburg Public School has a rotating security camera with a 340-degree turning radius, as well as six stationary cameras around the perimeter of the school, with at least one at every major entrance.

The cameras record 24 hours a day and store the footage for several weeks, Engravalle said, allowing school officials to revisit clips or capture images, which can in turn be turned over to police for analysis.

But although the cameras were installed at the school last July, the technology was only extended to the Hamburg police station and patrol cars this week.

"Columbine had cameras, but it was only their own internal thing, that's it," said Hamburg Police Lt. Jan Wright. "This lets us see right into the schools ourselves."

The system, established by the Newton-based Abcode Security, allows school and police officials to move the rotating camera and zoom in and out using software on their personal computers.

The zoom technology is so clear, Engravalle said, that he can read a license plate number from a car on the opposite side of Route 94 from the school, more than 150 yards away.

Wright said the cameras were first installed at the station Tuesday, but they have already been put to use. Police officers reviewed footage of the school exterior while pursuing a suspect who tried to break into the local Eckerd Pharmacy.

Superintendent Robert McCann said the borough school has had no serious incidents in the recent past, but that the district strongly emphasizes the need to be prepared.

"Hopefully, we'll never have to use it," McCann said of the school's security preparations. "That's the thing about practice. You hope you never have to put it into play, but you can never be too prepared."

McCann said the security system cost about \$23,000, but that it was paid for entirely through grants, with no cost to taxpayers. Much of it was paid for by a Homeland Security Grant of \$20,000, Engravalle said.

Since last summer, the district has installed key pads on the school entrances, created photo identification cards for all adult staff members and started hosting lock-down drills once every semester.

Engravalle said by this summer, the district hopes to have additional cameras set up inside the school, and will join a service that allows him to use his cell phone to instantly contact parents via phone, text message or e-mail.

Wright emphasized the importance of preparations such as these, and said the camera security system could help stop a situation before it begins.

"That's why these signs are all up saying there are video cameras everywhere," he said. "If there was a potential for some incident being caused by an outside person coming in, this could deter them."

McCann said the school district has a very strong working relationship with the police department, and that they often come to classes and speak directly to the students.

"They come in, say 'hi' to the kids, walk around the classroom," he said. "It's good for the kids to see them in a different light and see them as friends."