

Cameras in the Hallways

DV is third county school to get security cameras

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Four months after their installation, the Dakota Valley School District is so pleased with the performance of their security camera system that they are making plans to expand the program to all areas of the three school buildings.

Dakota Valley is the third Union County school district to receive Homeland Security grant funds to install a security camera system.

According to Superintendent Al Leber, Dakota Valley joined several other Sioux City metro schools seven years ago on a collective grant to obtain security cameras for their facilities. The funding for the grant did not come about, and most of the schools went their own way over the years to seek funding.

After 9/11 and the creation of the federal Homeland Security Administration, Union County Public Works and Homeland Security Director Raymond Roggow was able to secure federal funding for security cameras for the county's four school districts plus the Aspire High program in Beresford.

A total of \$15,000 was allocated each year for a school district, which could then add additional equipment as it saw fit. By agreement, Elk Point-Jefferson received the first allocation, followed by Alcester-Hudson, Dakota Valley, Beresford and Aspire High. Thanks to unused funds from other areas of the state, the program to install cameras at the schools has been accomplished more quickly than scheduled.

Dakota Valley received its grant funds in the fall of 2005 and contracted with Midwest Alarm of Sioux City for the installation of. Tyler Solma, a Dakota Valley resident and Midwest Alarm representative, assisted school staff members and volunteers with the installation of the system. Working nights and weekends, the system was hooked up by the Christmas holiday break and was in operation when school began again in January.

Sixteen cameras were installed around the high school and middle school building – six outside and five in the hallways of each of the two schools, which are actually one building. One of the outside cameras has the ability to scan a wide area and also zoom in on a subject. Total cost of the project including the federal grant, was \$17,800.

Leber said the high school-middle school building was selected for installation of the security cameras because of the amount of after-school activities that take place there and due to past incidents of theft and vandalism in the parking lot.

In at least three instances over the past semester, the cameras have been used to prove the guilt or innocence of a theft from a locker, a student altercation and an act of vandalism on a vehicle in the parking lot.

“We had a situation where two students had an altercation,” Leber said of one of the incidents. “We talked to the students and we got two sides to the story – each had their own story as to what happened. Luckily, the altercation occurred in a location that the video did pick up a majority of what happened as they moved down the hallway and we were able to determine from that who the aggressor was in that confrontation.”

The cameras are on 24 hours a day, seven days a week and can store eight to nine days of digital “tape” before starting over. Leber said the tapes are not reviewed on a regular basis, but when needed, such as when a possible incident has occurred and the details need to be confirmed.

The pictures for any of the cameras can be burned onto a CD for future use.

Only selected administrators are allowed to view the cameras and what they record.

“The videos are viewed by the administration and that’s as far as it goes,” said Leber. “We don’t show the videos to anyone else. We talked to our attorney about this when we were installing them and it was recommended that if anyone else wants to see them, they’ll almost have to get a subpoena. Really, we’re not trying to make people jump the hoops, but there is the idea that sometimes the video may have four or five other students also identifiable on these videos and their rights are protected too.”

Since the initial batch of cameras has worked so well, the district is looking into completion of the system at the high school and middle school and installing them at the elementary school. Leber said the greatest cost in the system is the recording device itself, which can handle up to 16 cameras. Since the system already has 16 cameras, another two recorders would be needed.

Leber said the district has allocated \$10,000 this year to complete the system in the high school-middle school and would like to set aside around \$20,000 next year to put a system in at the elementary school.

“The cameras are a useful tool to help provide safety and security for our building,” said high school principal Jerry Rasmussen. “Just like with any tool, there are limits to their usefulness. We have been able to use them several times since they have been installed and are an additional way to monitor student in the hallways.”

Middle school principal Harlan Halverson echoed those sentiments, saying the cameras have proven beneficial so far in different issues.