"RE-KEYING WITH CLASS"

Excerpt Of Article Which Appeared in *Security Management*

In the mid-1990's, the Chula Vista, California, elementary school (K-6) district, now comprising 40 or so schools, decided to modernize its older facilities, which dated back to the 1950s. Out went frayed electrical systems, dated plumbing, and ragged carpeting; in came color television, new furniture, fiber optics, and other new infrastructure. One aspect of the buildings remained distinctly low tech however; mechanical locks.

This standard lock-and-key system caused concern because in many cases the original keying still existed, and the administration had lost track of keys over the years. The addition of computer equipment, large-screen televisions, and other valuable technology at the refurbished schools made the issue all the more critical. "We wanted to be able to have control," says Chris Mages, Chula Vista's facility construction safety support manager.

In addition, Mages and his team of locksmiths wanted to reduce the time required to redo locking systems, re-keying an entire school is time consuming, Mages says.

Mages looked at InstaKey Lock Corporation, Denver, Colorado, which promised the ability to re-key and re-pin locks without hardware changes and offered comprehensive records management via special software. Mages spoke to InstaKey end users, such as a small school system in Branson, Missouri, which was pleased with the system.

To further assess the system, Mages asked for a demonstration and they agreed to test the system out on three schools that were being upgraded at the time. InstaKey provided the appropriate lock cores plus a master key for all doors in the schools, as well as two individual keys for all teachers: one to their specific classrooms and another that would open restricted common rooms, such as faculty lounges, rest rooms, and work rooms. Chula Vista locksmiths installed the cores.

The company also provided management software, which was installed on a PC. Key control is vested in Mages' office. His staff members distribute keys and keep track of them using the software, which tracks all lock hardware and cut and uncut keys via a unique serial number and user name.

Mages says that the graphical user interface allows easy tracking of keys, schools, users, access permissions, and other criteria. For example, Mages can pull up any door in any school and quickly determine how many corresponding keys have been assigned and to whom, when, and so forth.

When a new key is needed, a school administrator calls Mages and submits a request. After checking the order, Mages passes it on to his locksmiths. The software identifies the type of key and cut needed and communicates that information to the locksmiths. (As a licensed end user, Mages keeps a secure supply of uncut key blanks.)

Continued on Reverse

A locksmith's job, however, doesn't "close" until he or she records the key's serial number, recipient, and date in the system. The software will indicate that the job is still open until that information is entered, and Mages regularly checks the status of these orders for anomalies. He also inventories blank keys by serial number. This process prevents keys from being cut and not recorded.

Unauthorized key reproduction is impossible, says Mages, because InstaKey's key milling process is unique. "Another distributor can't provide this key blank," Mages says. In other words, the local locksmith won't have the blank required to cut the key.

The three-school trial, which began in June 2000, went well, says Mages. As a result, InstaKey was added to another three schools that were being newly constructed—in December 2000, March 2001, and September 2001. Two previously modernized schools also switched over to InstaKey because of key problems there.

Despite the generally positive experience Mages has had, a few snags have cropped up. For example, at first, reports weren't customized the way Mages wanted them. He wanted to see keys in sequential order and to have all master keys show up in a specific field. But the desired features didn't exist at the time. An upgrade has since solved those issues.

Customer support has been superb, says Mages. In one case, the entire key system for one school—which included the set of all cores for every door in the school and the corresponding keys—got lost in the mail, InstaKey re-pined the system, a time-consuming process, and had it to Chula Vista in two or three days.

Chula Vista's educational center—home of support staff such as maintenance and accounting—is in the process of installing InstaKey as well. In addition, five more schools will be modernized this summer, along with the remaining six within the next five years or so, and all will receive InstaKey. Mages and his staff will retrofit already modernized facilities that lack the system. Newly constructed schools will also incorporate InstaKey.

Mages says that the system has simplified tracking of misplaced items and has thus increased personal responsibility among school staff. Faculty approval of the new system has been high as well, Mages said.

Most important, the product has restored the district's sense of key control in a system where keys are plentiful. With 150 doors per school, controlling keys is "a big deal," says Mages. Now, for the eight schools that already have the system, he says, "I know for a fact where every master key is…and I know how many keys are out there." And that's the key to good access control.

— By Michael A. Gips, Senior Editor of Security Management