



Episode 31: From the Outside In: The Role of Tech in School Emergency Operations Plans

#REMSontheAir Podcast Intro (Recorded): [00:00:00] Welcome to the #REMSontheAir Podcast, hosted by your partners at the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools and its Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center. If you're an old friend, you know us as the REMS TA Center, your national school safety center.

Join us as we chat about key topics in school and campus safety, security, and emergency management with experts and partners from the field.

Alison Curtis: Hello and welcome to the #REMSontheAir Podcast. I'm Alison Curtis, Director of Information and Product Management at the REMS TA Center. Today I'm joined by my colleague Katie Barnett to consider the role that technology plays in school emergency preparedness and [00:01:00] capacity building.

Katie Barnett: In light of an ever-changing threat landscape, schools need to be *more* than well prepared when it comes to managing critical incidents and identifying threats and hazards. New advances in technology continue to change the emergency preparedness landscape. From digital security systems to geofences and crisis management apps, technology may make us feel like schools can be safer than ever before. But, Alison, is that actually true?

Alison Curtis: Well, that's a great question, Katie. Technology plays an interesting role because its use can either help or harm emergency preparedness and response. Just having the latest tech is not enough. Schools must also know how and when to use it, how to maintain it, and which of the many options out there are right for them.

To help us address these topics, we've invited Mr. Carlton Gerald to weigh in with his expertise. Carlton currently serves as the Assistant Director [00:02:00] of Security and Emergency Operations for Alexandria Public Schools in Virginia. Prior to this role, he led the newly created Emergency Planning and Guidance Unit for the District of Columbia Public Schools within the Office of the Chief Operating Officer.

He has also worked closely with the District of Columbia Homeland Security Emergency Management Agency, as well as authored a number of schoolwide policies and designed and implemented state-of-the-art physical security for schools, and he's been the point of contact for preparedness training and compliance. His background in law enforcement gives him a unique lens in the area of emergency preparedness.

Today, Carlton also conducts a number of trainings for FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] on preparedness and response. So, we are very grateful to have him here today and have the opportunity to learn from Carlton.

Katie Barnett: Let's hear from Carlton now and get his take on the role of technology in school safety [00:03:00] posture.

Alison Curtis: Hi Carlton, welcome to the *#RemsontheAir* Podcast.

Carlton Gerald: Thank you, Alison. I really appreciate it. I'm very excited to be here.

Alison Curtis: It's awesome to have you here today. And before, you have mentioned with us that you develop emergency or security postures based on an outside-in approach. Can you explain a little bit more about this?

Carlton Gerald: Yeah, sure, that's a great question. At any time that a, as I like to call it, a security practitioner or someone that's in responsible charge or—of an EOP (emergency operating plan) or a security action plan or whatever you may call it, it's always a best practice to look outward and work your way in, meaning looking at threats, hazards, gaps, or anything that the threat or the adversary may be wanting [00:04:00] to cause harm to your overall target audience.

And whenever you do that, you get a high-level understanding and overview of all the things that you should, that you should and could take into play, meaning your lighting, right, just looking at your lighting, what that looks like. And obviously the overall community in general, looking at the infrastructure, looking at all different types of things that may affect what you're trying to protect and then obviously start to build what it should and could look like on the inside from a physical security standpoint as well. So, kind of sort of like to start there.

Alison Curtis: That's a great strategy that everyone can consider in their own education agencies. Where and how should schools rely on technology in their emergency management planning, according to you?

Carlton Gerald: Yes. So, yeah, I think that schools [00:05:00] should always, as I like to say, strike a balance in between technology and old-fashioned operational understanding and strategies as far as what should be done before, during, and after a critical incident. We all know that leveraging technology is great, but there's a reason why we have Google, and there's a reason why we have pen and pad, right—as well as Chat GPT-4—so we can never forget about those things.

But in the world that we live in now, looking at technology and leveraging technology based upon the school or school district that has the means or the funding is a really, really good thought. But again, it has to be leveraged in a way that it makes sense for that particular enterprise or school district, meaning physical security, just to start with that.

There's—obviously cameras are [00:06:00] absolutely amazing, the evidence-gathering tools after the fact. They don't solve crimes for us, they only support and help us solve crimes. They're not going to do the operational work. But the integrated portion of that is obviously artificial intelligence or technology that has been integrated in camera systems that can actually analytically identify adversaries or our threat actors that may want to do harm to a school, that is able to actually look out quickly and identify outside of the school zone that this individual may have a weapon of some sort, a long gun, a long gun, a handgun, or something or another like that, that he's, on his way to this pathway to violence, if you will.

So again, just from a physical security standpoint, looking at [00:07:00] technologies like that, as well as technologies that can be deployed on the top of schools. So, you can hear different types of gunshots and what have you, so that schools can have an action steps when and if they hear these sounds so that they can activate their crisis management plans or their emergency operations plans or whatever they may call them. So, leveraging that in that way, as well as coming forward inside the school in regards to your overall weapons abatement program (some people may call it “weapons detection,” but it's—we call it a “weapons abatement”) and what that looks like, deploying systems that are looking for weapons of mass destruction, not just necessarily a—airport metal detectors, looking for things that can harm folks that are there for a mass gathering or a high [00:08:00] number of individuals in a particular location.

So again, looking across the spectrum as far as overall technologies, Alison, there's a lot to be looked at. But again, the security practitioner, the person that's in responsible charge should have a clear understanding of the technologies that are out there and look at best practices in regards to, if they own this asset, what it would take to keep and manage that asset as well, as well as overall policies and procedures in regards to managing it as well.

Alison Curtis: Thanks, Carlton, and do you have any recommendations in terms of how to choose the best ones, or any technology that you should use to prepare for specific adversaries?

Carlton Gerald: Yeah, it's a great question. I would definitely recommend to schools and school districts all across just to think about what some of the threats and hazards [00:09:00] they are seeing that—it's near their community and obviously taking a national look about some of the things that they are hearing about in other schools and school districts, and say, “Well, hey, how can we mitigate when and if a critical incident like this happens at our school?” or “We had this near miss at our school.”

So, I would say start thinking about it. Look at overall—other schools and school districts, have conversations with them about what platforms and what technologies they are using. But the first step, obviously, is doing the homework about what technologies are out there. So, being a good steward of understanding the tech, but as well as taking an old-school site visit to a school

or school district that's actually leveraging that technology so that you can have a clear and better understanding of [00:10:00] how it works and really having a good understanding about the "good" and if there's any "bad" and, last but not least, is there any "ugly," right, from a continual cost?

So again, getting that real-time information and intelligence from another school partner or a community or an agency, and getting that and taking that information back and overall justifying if it's a good fit for your school district.

Katie Barnett: Thank you so much for that, Carlton. That's so insightful. I love your specificity about becoming clear on what the asset is that you're trying to protect and taking a holistic approach when it comes to technology: What actually makes sense for this specific threat actor or situation?

Kind of along these lines, is there such a thing as relying too much on [00:11:00] tech, or have you experienced an incident where maybe there was a false sense of safety or a misuse of tech that schools and school leaders should know about?

Carlton Gerald: Knock on wood, I haven't had one generally yet. I'm more of a hybrid, meaning that I like to obviously always lean on our technology, but at the same time, I want to inspect what I expect, right, meaning, in regards to the technology, "Is it doing what it's supposed to do? Am I testing the technology in regards to saying what it's sup—should be doing? Am I reporting out at a high level in regards to some of the things that it's supposed to be doing? Am I gathering the data to support what it's supposed to be doing?" in regards to, again, justifying all these things that we're purchasing.

So, to kind of sort of answer the question in a, in a different way, [00:12:00] there are times whereas there are others in schools and school districts that are looking at technologies that isn't just a good fit for them. Just from an overall funding standpoint, it's not sustainable, meaning that there are technologies that are just leased. And even though it's an opportunity and is mitigating some of the things that are out there, but can the school or school district continue to fund this technology that may be protecting students, staff, and visitors?

So again, how are you looking at it? I would just also say that when schools are really thinking about that, I think it's really, really important that they really think about "protection in depth," and that's a term that I like to use in regards to how they're going to protect their [00:13:00] overall asset, which is obviously the students, staff, visitors, as well as information. So, a lot of folks tend to forget about information, and that's where I think that technology really, really, really is supportive, meaning, i.e., the recent situation that we had with this company called CrowdStrike, right, that everybody's so dependent on technology in this way, but it affected so many vectors and sectors all across the United States that we were literally crippled.

So, just thinking about that in regards to technology and information, and just really, really thinking deeply about when and if the zombie apocalypse does happen, is there a backup to the backup? So.

Katie Barnett: Yeah, I really, I really appreciate that. There are so many different vendors out there, new advances almost every week it seems, and I think it's [00:14:00] easy to get distracted by the bells and whistles and even wondering, like "Oh, am I keeping abreast of everything?" But it really sounds like you're slowing us down, wanting us to check if we're getting what we expect from the technology and also thinking about, outside of that, the backups for the backups, as you suggested. So, thank you so much for your take on that.

Carlton Gerald: Definitely.

Alison Curtis: Carlton, you kind of already mentioned one, but we want to get your take on if there are any other misunderstandings or human errors or pitfalls regarding technology that schools tend to fall into and how they can avoid that in the future.

Carlton Gerald: Yeah, I mean, I think, again, striking a balance in between the technology and the action response, right, on the human side, meaning if there's some type of, say, technology that alerts to smoke [00:15:00] or some type of sensor or, let's just say, a vape sensor, what is the action response in regards to when and if this technology alerts? And how does the school manage that? What does that look like when it comes down to overall school discipline? What does that look like in regards to proving or showing that this technology worked? And what is the school administrator's response in regards to that? So again, we can have this high-level technology, but how do we deconflict who—the person that was actually doing, or rather had a part in, the school violation.

So again, that's part of it. So, even though it may say that there's enough reasonable suspicion in a school setting to have a conversation with the [00:16:00] student because of this technology, but again, there is some work to be done in regards to deconflicting all of that, especially when it's 30 students in a bathroom, right?

Alison Curtis: Thank you so much, Carlton. Some more great, you know, pointers to consider at schools across the country.

Katie Barnett: So, Carlton, I'm curious, is there anything else that you'd like to share with our listeners today that we've not asked about yet?

Carlton Gerald: Yeah, I would definitely just say this, is that irregardless of whatever technology or new bell, whistle, or what have you that you may see out there that you may think is a good fit for your school or school district, I would encourage you to do the work, meaning that,

become a steward or have a clear understanding of its capabilities and what it can and what it cannot do. And articulate that to your senior [00:17:00] leadership, go and conduct a site visit, have those amazing conversations with those individuals who are already leveraging that technology, and have them give you, again, the good, the bad, and hopefully not the ugly.

But, again, truly, truly owning the asset as a security practitioner. I am a huge proponent of understanding risk and when and if you can accept risk, transfer risk, and all those things. So, again, I think it's extremely important that schools and school districts or, more importantly, that that emergency manager or security practitioner or security director that has, or rather is in responsible charge of, that, conduct a really, really high-level mitigation strategy to reduce the risk based upon the asset goals and objectives. And then take that [00:18:00] information back to the enterprise or the organizations and have that C-suite or that senior leadership or that school administration or that amazing superintendent that is willing to accept this risk or transfer this risk or spread this risk along.

So, again, there are so many ways that you can really, really, look at it. But, again, the ultimate decision is obviously up to the leadership, but, again, as a security practitioner to frame it in a way that he, she, or they can have a clear understanding about what it is and that you are going to manage this asset, and it's going to do exactly what you want it to do. But you also can share out at a high level about what it has done to protect people, property, and information at your school or school district.

Katie Barnett: Well, I really appreciate that, thank you. [00:19:00] That was a great list. That's really clear and actionable. And it's really neat to think that with all the advancements in technology, we really can steward and own the ones that we choose at our schools. So, thanks, Carlton.

Carlton Gerald: You're very welcome.

Alison Curtis: Carlton, thank you so, so much for taking the time to talk with us today and share your insight. It was a pleasure to have you here.

Carlton Gerald: Pleasure's all mine. It's always a joy to speak with the REMS TA team, the amazing work that you all are doing to keep schools and school districts safe. The work is, and I can't say enough, the full credit and the full measure should be just shared all across the world, I think, just to be very honest. You guys are doing amazing work, and keep doing exactly what you're doing. And I love the way that you're integrating the social media as well. So, kudos always.

Katie Barnett: That was so helpful to hear [00:20:00] Carlton's take on the role of technology in school emergency preparedness. Alison, what resources do we have here at the REMS TA Center that can support listeners on today's topic?

Alison Curtis: Well, the REMS TA Center has produced a webinar on the role of information technology specialists in school safety. Although it's targeted towards IT specialists, the entire school community can benefit from concepts shared within it. The cybersecurity preparedness Web page on the REMS TA Center site is also a great place to learn about cybersecurity threats and tools, as well as protections to put in place in K-12 schools and institutions of higher education.

Katie Barnett: Well, thanks for sharing that with our listeners. And what about our interactive resources? Do any of those apply to this topic?

Alison Curtis: Yes, thanks to technology, we at the REMS TA Center are pleased to offer a suite of free interactive tools to help you, regardless of your [00:21:00] experience with emergency management.

The SITE ASSESS mobile application is for conducting site assessments, and teams can use it to examine the safety, security, emergency preparedness, and accessibility of their buildings and grounds right from their mobile device. You can download this tool from the Google Play or Apple App stores.

EOP ASSESS is embedded into our site and helps users familiarize themselves with important emergency management planning concepts. Planning team members can use this tool to test their knowledge and engage in professional development.

EOP EVALUATE helps to evaluate an existing plan and identify areas of improvement, and you can access this tool directly from our site as well.

And our last tool is EOP ASSIST, which is a plan generator software application. Planning teams can use it to generate a customized EOP that is developed using the six-step planning [00:22:00] process. You can download this tool from our site before you have IT personnel install it on your education agency's server.

And then we also created an offline version, the EOP ASSIST Interactive Workbook, and it's composed of instructions and worksheets and is available in Spanish.

Katie Barnett: Thank you so much, those are so helpful. And that's an example of a good use of technology, as long as you do what Carlton said and know what you're using it for and the outcome. So, thank you so much for that. We do also have a suite of online courses that users can take on a variety of emergency topics, so please check those out.

Alison Curtis: Yes, and our courses are interactive too, as well as password protected.

Katie Barnett: And listeners, also don't forget that you can join our mailing list or connect with us at any time by emailing info@remstacenter.org. Our mailing list [00:23:00] is where you'll get updates on webinars, Web chats, and other virtual opportunities to learn and share.

Alison Curtis: You can also connect with us on social media and bookmark the *#REMSontheAir* hashtag. If you have any questions related to today's discussion, or you just want to learn more, please contact us via email at info@remstacenter.org or phone at 1-855-781-7367. Who knows, maybe your question will inspire a future podcast episode.

And you can access additional *#REMSontheAir* Podcast episodes by visiting the REMS TA Center's podcast page. Share it with your colleagues by clicking the share tab that appears along the left side of your screen.

Katie Barnett: Have a wonderful day.

Alison Curtis: Goodbye, and stay safe.