

Security hiring success hinges on student relationships

Approximately 29 percent of elementary schools, 63 percent of middle schools, and 64 percent of high school schools have some type of security personnel present at the school at least once a week, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. When it comes to hiring security, experts say that relationships with students are the highest priority. By ensuring school security personnel can build positive relationships with students and staff, you can improve school climate and safety.

Key points

- Positive relationships improve security rapport
- Look beyond stature and experience when hiring
- Acclimate new hires to variety of district settings

“You should understand that everybody with experience in security or law enforcement isn’t always a good fit for your school,” said Timothy Mallory, vice president of the National Association of School

Safety and Law Enforcement Officials. “You just can’t hire somebody, throw them out there, and expect them to be successful. Relationship-building with students is most important to be successful in school safety and security.”

Mallory provided the following tips when hiring school security personnel:

- **Advertise openings.** Districts will typically solicit new staff through newspaper advertisements, the district’s website, social media, print newsletters, and their HR department, Mallory said. “Also, you can visit local career fairs to find new security staff.”

- **Ask questions.** Be sure to ask questions to prospective hires to identify relevant skills and experience to ensure the person is suitable for the position. “Experience is always good, but what’s most important is that the person has the ability and experience in working with students,” Mallory said. “People become police officers without having that experience, but they can learn on the job.” There may be times when a school simply looks at the person’s physical stature or their law enforcement experience before making a hiring decision, Mallory said. “The most important thing is knowing the person can work with students,” he said. “Experience is important in security, but first and foremost, working with students is the most important aspect.”

- **Diversify your team.** “You know how your security team interacts and its strengths and weaknesses,” Mallory said. “Determine the areas where you need different personalities to ensure balance.” For instance, you may have some security personnel who are strong communicators, while others have stronger writing skills. “You want people with a variety of skills to achieve that balance,” Mallory said.

- **Ensure training.** Ask new hires to shadow a veteran at the beginning of their employment. “They should shadow the veteran in different school buildings because every school’s culture may be a little different,” Mallory said. “For example, we assign new hires with an experienced officer to work side-by-side and learn the job. We move them to a new location every few days to allow the person to experience a variety of settings.”

- **Build student-security relationships.** It’s mission-critical for school security personnel to build positive relationships with students, which often hinges on understanding the school culture and the local community. “School security personnel can do simple things such as greeting students in the morning to build rapport,” Mallory said. “Ultimately, you have to love working with kids. You build the relationship by talking to students and asking them how they’re doing.”

- **Introduce new hires.** In an ideal situation, the new hire will go to different buildings before being assigned to a permanent location. That allows more people in the district to become familiar with the new hire. “If a new school security officer is hired during the school year, make sure to introduce the individual to the entire security team,” Mallory said. “In general, new hires are tested by their environment. If you work with a veteran officer for a few days, the students will recognize the person as part of the security team.”

- **Get parents on board.** Ensure that parents are familiar with the school’s code of conduct and behavioral expectations. Parents should acknowledge and sign the school rules at the start of the year. “Any safety-related incident at school provides an opportunity to engage with parents,” Mallory said. “Talk to them about what occurred and how they can offer support.” Be sure to address parents in a professional manner to help students understand the difference between professional relationships and friendships. “Ultimately, we want to build positive relationships with students, but not friendships,” Mallory said.

Email Mallory at vicepresident@nassleo.org. ■