Lessons from a journey toward modern safety

Main author

Jill Renihan, Education Segment Development Manager, Axis Communications

January 2026

AXIS®
COMMUNICATIONS

Table of contents

1. Introduction

This story begins during a period in which our district faced deeply entrenched vulnerabilities. Conditions so outdated and fragmented that they placed our students and staff at unacceptable risk. What followed was a long, difficult, and often exhausting effort to rebuild an entire security ecosystem from the ground up. It required collaboration, conviction, and the willingness to act decisively even when solutions were imperfect or resources uncertain. Yet ultimately, it became one of the most significant security turnarounds in Florida, proving that meaningful change is possible even under the most constrained circumstances.

Before I tell this story, I wanted to share my background. I spent thirty-four years with Hernando County Schools. My work spanned special education, behavioral analysis, mental health coordination, and fourteen years as a school-based administrator across elementary, middle, and high school campuses. For five years, I served as the District Safety Specialist before concluding my career as the Executive Director of Business Services. Over time, I supported nearly every operational and instructional function of our organization: from budget and labor, leadership development to mental health services and crisis response. What I did not anticipate was being asked to lead a wholesale transformation of school safety and security.

2. The rising urgency behind school safety

After the tragedy at Parkland, Florida enacted HB 7026, requiring every district to designate an administrator responsible for mental health and school safety. Although I was involved in districtwide discussions, I had not envisioned myself in that role. In fact, I even recommended others for it. But as the complexities of the position became clear, and leadership considered the experiences needed to navigate them, I was ultimately asked to step forward.

Before talking about technologies or tactics, it is important to first ground ourselves in the "why." School shootings were rising and the national data was heartbreaking. According to not-for profit organization Sandy Hook Promise, twelve children die every day from gun violence in the United States, and another thirty-two are injured. These numbers aren't distant abstractions for educators. They shape every policy, every procedure, and every conversation about safety. The urgency is not theoretical; it is lived.

3. A district left behind

At the time I assumed this position, our district included twenty-three schools serving 25,000 students and more than 3,250 employees. Yet despite our size, our physical security posture was alarmingly outdated.

Front doors were unlocked. Classroom doors were unlocked. Gates were compromised. Perimeter fencing was incomplete. Lobbies were open and unmonitored. Electronic locks were offline. We lacked site assessments, consistent key systems, and foundational security protocols. It short, it was a system that had not kept pace with modern risks.

Emergency preparedness was equally insufficient. Although drills were performed annually, there was no leadership training on managing an unfolding crisis. Only nine School Resource Officers served the entire district, and our response to an active assailant was reduced to a single directive: "lockdown."

The technology was worse. Our security system relied on 15-year-old analog equipment including coaxial cabling, DVRs, and 2,500 cameras incapable of delivering real-time intelligence or districtwide visibility. No school had a centralized video feed. A single hallway intersection required four individual cameras to produce even a partial view. In many ways, the video quality resembled what one might expect from an old convenience store system.
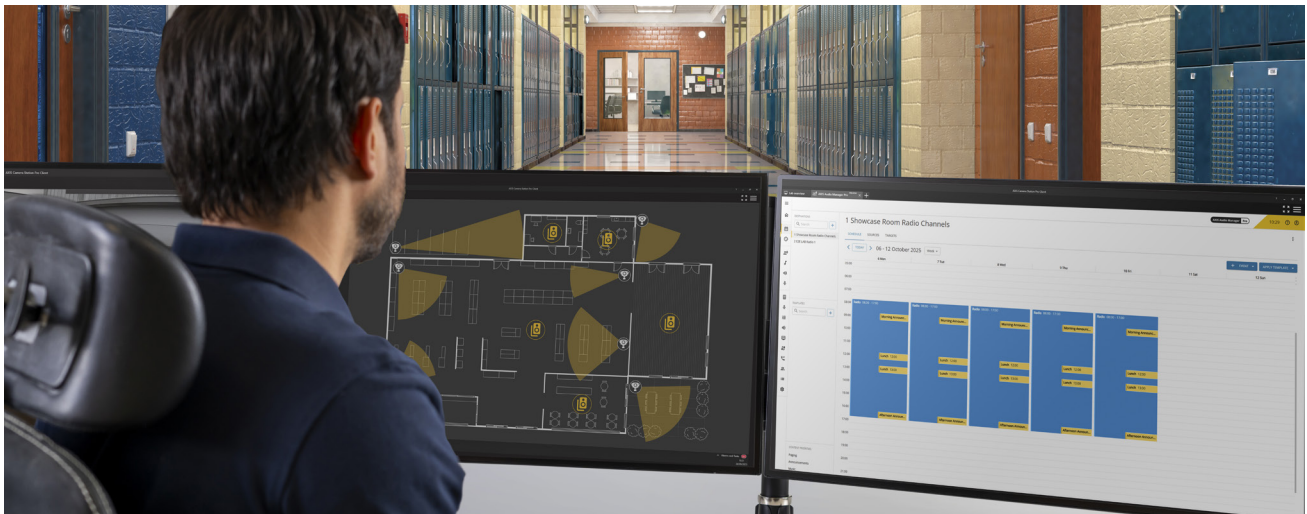
A comprehensive assessment revealed systemic deficiencies: no district training plan, decades-old staff badges, compromised gates, and a mindset that stalled progress. One former employee had once said, "I won't start a project unless I can complete the whole district at one time." As a result, nothing moved.

4. Beginning the work despite barriers

A quote often attributed to Walt Disney says, "The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing." However, we faced a major challenge as we had faced three years of budget cuts. A $1 million legislative request was vetoed. State hardening grants were shrinking. In fact, between 2000 and 2020, the district received less capital funding in total than what we received in 2019 alone.

Yet progress began despite the setbacks. We secured a federal grant and voters approved a half-cent sales tax renewal and a millage increase. Slowly, the possibilities for real transformation and innovation opened up.

5. A systematic approach to ensuring safety and security

We started where the risk was greatest: controlling access to buildings. With front doors left unlocked across the district, we installed network intercom call stations, ceiling-mounted entry cameras, and began transitioning to POE++ hardware and modern cabling. We conducted meticulous camera placement walks - sometimes as many as five per campus - to ensure proper coverage.

Our pilot installation deployed twenty-seven cameras and a video management system supported by two servers. The next phase added 108 devices and more servers, each built with capacity for growth.
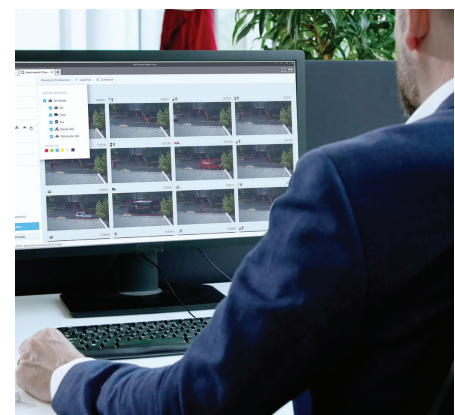
From there, we expanded. To address vaping, we implemented smart sensors integrated with camera I/O to trigger automated alerts. Campuses without functional public address systems received new speakers and SIP microphones for mass communication. We introduced artificial intelligence into our network cameras and integrated it with our district panic app, as mandated by Alyssa's Law. We partnered with law enforcement to provide Real-Time Crime Center access to selected cameras, supporting emergency response and crime resolution.

Our first AI partnership was with ZeroEyes, a company specializing in firearm detection. Their platform can detect a long gun with as little as 10 percent visibility and a handgun with just 25 percent. Their alert protocol is built for speed; 2–3 second SMS notifications, app alerts in the same window, a ten-second phone call to designated contacts, and full 'CrisisGo', (our emergency management app of choice), notification within fifteen seconds. In a crisis, those seconds matter.

6. A modern security ecosystem

Today, the district's transformation is unmistakable. The before-and-after comparisons are dramatic. At the time I left the district, our security personnel profile had expanded to twenty-three School Resource Officers, a district float, a corporal, two sergeants, a lieutenant, and eight armed guardians. All front doors remained locked throughout the day. All classroom doors were locked. Access control was modernized. Gates were rebuilt or replaced, perimeters were fully fenced and controlled vestibules were constructed. To improve and reset authorized access, staff IDs and badges were refreshed districtwide.

Our efforts earned national recognition when Campus Safety Magazine awarded Hernando County Schools the BEST Award for Project Management/Overall Project by an Integrator.

The award highlighted how our upgraded systems consisting of Axis cameras, VMS, intercoms, speakers, and integrated software moved the district from a reactive stance to a proactive, prevention-focused posture.

One incident at Springstead High School illustrated the impact. When a student found a backpack containing a loaded magazine and turned it in, administrators used the upgraded Axis panoramic cameras and smart search functionality in the Axis video management system (VMS) to identify who had placed it there. Within ten minutes, staff located the student, questioned him, validated his story, and confirmed that no threat existed. The clarity and comprehensiveness of our system enabled rapid, accurate decision-making and prevented unnecessary escalation.

7. Stepping toward a brighter future

Our journey out of darkness was powered by partnerships, aligned mission, and committed people. We moved from unlocked doors and antiquated equipment to a modern, districtwide security ecosystem capable of meeting contemporary threats. It took persistence, creativity, and an unwavering belief that our students and staff deserved better.

Today, we stand in a far safer place because of that commitment. And it is a reminder that no matter how outdated or overwhelming a system may seem, transformation is always possible when the mission is clear and the will to act is strong.

Please contact us for more information about using technology to ensure safety and security in educational institutions. Any school based in the USA that is interested in developing a better security posture, please reference the PASS guidelines.

About Axis Communications

Axis enables a smarter and safer world by improving security, safety, operational efficiency, and business intelligence. As a network technology company and industry leader, Axis offers video surveillance, access control, intercoms, and audio solutions. These are enhanced by intelligent analytics applications and supported by high-quality training.

Axis has around 5,000 dedicated employees in over 50 countries and collaborates with technology and system integration partners worldwide to deliver customer solutions. Axis was founded in 1984, and the headquarters are in Lund, Sweden.

AXIS®

COMMUNICATIONS