

# Department of Education and Child Development (DECD)

The effectiveness of school security fencing around South Australian public schools

## The Client

The Department of Education and Child Development (DECD) is the state government department in South Australia responsible for providing public primary and secondary schooling. It is responsible for the education of some 180,000 students, employing 13,500 teachers and early childhood educators working at nearly 710 pre, primary and secondary schools across the state.

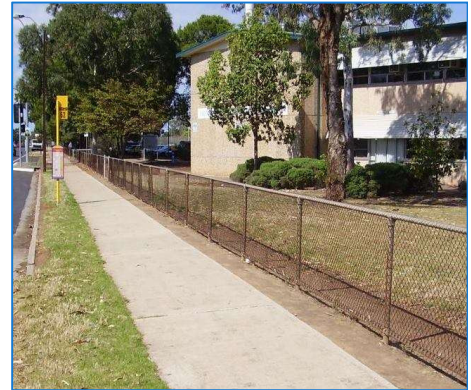
DECD and its Asset Services Security Team, is responsible for managing all aspects of security at DECD sites, including the provision of resources and support to school administration, as well as contributing to the management of security related capital projects. They also bare the considerable task of trying to combat the threats to property and people in the school environment, and handling the growing governmental importance and profile of security measures including security fencing. Further, there is an accompanying community expectation for the government to remedy these threats by delivering tangible measures on or ahead of time, on cost and without incident. At the same time, with substantial recurring capital project there is increasing desire for smarter and more efficient contracting on the part of DECD to extract greater value for money on its spend.

The Security Team also have the ongoing task of trying to educate and inform the school administration of the many factors that contribute to security risks and of the practical measures that can be taken to reduce the risk of damage and the incidence of other anti-social behaviour on school grounds. It also faces the challenge of trying to best accommodate the needs and wants of many school sites competing for limited funding and liaising with other relevant stakeholders such as local councils and sporting groups.

## Project Background

There are many features about the usage patterns and layout of schools that make them a preferred target for theft, arson, graffiti and vandalism. This form of crime has been found to be predominantly opportunistic and to occur particularly outside of school hours and in school holidays.

Properly specified and installed security fencing is a strong physical and psychological deterrent to potential intruders, and as one aspect of environmental design, has proven very effective in reducing the frequency of these attacks. At the same time it aesthetically renews the appearance of the site. Prior to the installation of the new powder coated tubular steel security fencing, the majority of the school sites either had no perimeter fencing or 900mm high chainwire fencing that provided a low level of security.



Before: Freemont Elizabeth. The existing 900mm high chainwire fabric fence offers little security.



After: Freemont Elizabeth. 2100mm high security fencing dramatically increases the security of the site.



Graffiti in schools results in significant financial and social costs.<sup>17</sup>

The installation of security fencing at high risk school sites is a high profile government initiative and represents a clear demonstration to the wider community that the asset owner and operator (in this case DECD) is serious about protecting these valuable community assets and ensuring schools are safe spaces free of disruption.

The range of drivers for school perimeter security fencing include:

- Prevent unauthorised access outside of school hours resulting in: graffiti, in particular spray painting tags on buildings; lighting of fires; theft of school property; breaking windows; removing bolts from playground equipment; damaging outdoor furniture; and destroying plants and gardens.
- Creating a “safe community for students” and a “safety perception in the eyes of families intending to enrol their children”<sup>7</sup>.
- Prevent the school grounds being used by members of the community as a thoroughfare (shortcut) during and after school hours.
- Control the access/egress points of parents to the school during school hours, including in relation to child protection.
- Control contact between students and non-students resulting in anti-social behaviour during school hours.
- Allow ‘lock down’ and emergency evacuation procedures to be implemented effectively.
- Control the movement of pedestrian and vehicles in and around the school.



‘Tagging’ of school classrooms<sup>6</sup>.



‘Tagging’ of school whiteboards<sup>6</sup>.



‘Tagging’ of school honour board<sup>6</sup>.

The range of negative impacts associated with poor perimeter security include the:

- Financial cost to repair or replace damaged or stolen assets.
- Opportunity cost of the client not being able to spend the funds more constructively elsewhere.
- Disruption to student learning.
- Emotional stress to the school community.

In terms of the severity of the problem, in 2007 it was reported<sup>1</sup> that arson, vandalism and theft at schools had left South Australian taxpayers with a repair bill of nearly \$140 million over the previous 18 years. That since, 1988, the total cost of repair work for damage and replacement of equipment caused by vandalism and theft was \$92.6 million, and that over the same period, the total cost of replacing material and equipment as a result of fire and fire losses was \$45.6 million. In 1988-89, the cost of repairs and replacement was \$5.7 million, growing to \$14.2 million in 2005-06. At the time the Education Minister conceded the government was “playing catch-up on school security over the last five years”.

In May 2007 the South Australian government announced<sup>2</sup> it would spend \$5 million under the school safety program and that 30 schools at greatest risk of after hour’s arson and vandal attacks would have perimeter security fencing installed. At the time the then Education Minister Jane Lomax-Smith was reported as saying:

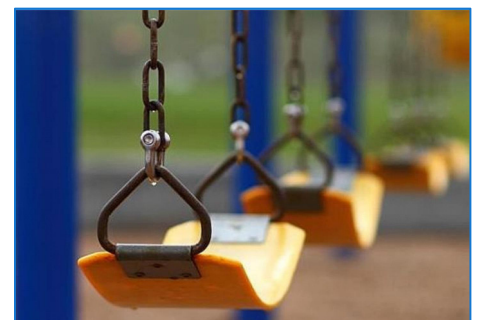
“Experience has shown that security fencing is highly effective in reducing after hour’s criminal activity on school grounds.

“Incidents at two suburban primary schools dropped from more than 20 per month to an average of less than one incident per month after fencing was erected.

Arson attack at Munno Para Primary School (17/11/08).

Estimated damage \$50,000.

"It's caused a significant dislocation for our students, a sense of loss, loss of their work and their work place, and their relationship to how they see themselves as part of the school community." School Principal



At one school vandals unbolted play equipment posing a serious threat to the students.

“A high school, which had an average of more than two serious break and enter and theft incidents per month, has not had a single incident since fencing was erected nine months ago.

“The incident rate at two metropolitan schools has reduced dramatically since fences were installed.”

“We expect our new security fencing program to save tens of thousands of dollars in years to come and that is money that can be reinvested into the education of South Australia’s children.”

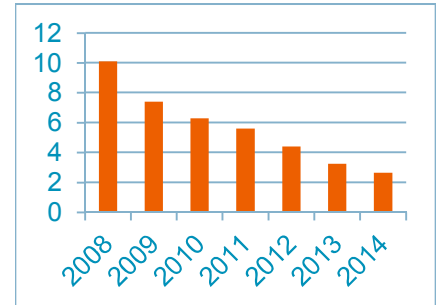
In June 2008, a further \$1.1M was allocated increasing the number of schools to be fenced to 35 and the total program value to \$6M up to 2011.

To illustrate the financial cost of vandalism on a school base: in a 2 month period in 2008, a fire was deliberately lit at Madison Park Primary School (20/10/08) causing an estimated \$50,000 damage; at Munno Para Primary School (17/11/08); and Modbury South Special School (26/11/08) causing more than \$200,000 damage. In 2011 it was reported that the top ten vandalism claims in 2010 cost DECD \$840,000

These attacks not only have a huge financial cost but also a dramatic social cost and are highly regressive to community development. In 2013, the then Education Minister was reported<sup>10</sup> as saying that “school communities suffered with every vandalism attack, the damage may only seem structural but it affects the spirit of the entire school community.”

In terms of the social and non-financial impact on individual schools of this sort of crime:

- In May 2013 R-12 Paralowie Public school was subject to a vandalism assault with over 200 ‘tags’ painted on school buildings. The following day school principal said publically<sup>8</sup> the incident was “very upsetting” for teachers, parents and particularly students.
- Elizabeth Vale Primary Principal Grant Small said “There was extensive graffiti, theft and vandalism that would happen every weekend,” he said. “What it meant was the community couldn’t develop their pride in the school.”
- West Lakes Shores Primary School Principal Sue Toone, was reported<sup>13</sup> saying “It costs the taxpayer a significant amount of money and one of the advantages is it will allow us to do things like planting vegetables gardens and fruit trees” and “One of the things we get frustrated about is if we plant our annuals to try and make the place look beautiful, you come back the next morning and they are gone”, and “The kind of vandalism to the playground is the sort of vandalism that poses a risk to children’s safety and it’s disappointing for everyone.
- Port Lincoln Principal wrote<sup>15</sup> described the negative impact on the “emotional wellbeing of staff and students” and “significantly disrupting learning”.



School security fencing has reduced vandalism in SA schools by 67% on average and nearly 100% in a number of schools.

In 2015 it was reported that fencing in combination with letter drops and patrols has seen the cost of vandalism decrease from \$10.1 million in 2008 to \$2.66 million in 2014. That the installation of school perimeter security fencing had reduced damage to school property by an average of 65 per cent and, in one case, vandalism had been stopped altogether.

The Education and Child Development Minister Susan Close was reported saying “Since 2006, the State Government has invested \$10.9 million in security fencing at schools across the state, resulting in a noticeable decrease in crime”. The department’s executive director of infrastructure, Ross Treadwell, said security fences have proven to be an “effective tool” in combating vandalism. We estimate that the State Government has saved over \$30 million in reducing the cost of repairs. This assumes the cost of vandalism would have remained at the 2008 levels, save for the security fencing being installed. Based on the data in the previous 4



South Australian Education Minister Susan Close, at Blackwood Primary in 2015 reporting on the effectiveness of the school security fencing installed at the school by Bluedog.



years it is arguable the annual damage bill would have increased so in effect increasing the return on investment in the fencing. This is not to mention the direct and indirect social cost of vandalism and other anti-social behaviour that has been reduced or eliminated with the fencing.

In terms of specific school sites:

- Elizabeth Vale Primary principal Grant Small said a fence installed at the school last year had virtually wiped out vandalism, reducing the annual damage bill from more than \$150,000 to “next to nothing”.
- Blackwood Primary R-7 Principal, Phil Garner, is reported as saying “Security wise, vandalism has actually decreased by 100%, as has graffiti”.<sup>10</sup>
- “Vandalism reduced by more than 90 per cent after the construction of a security fence at Elizabeth Downs Primary School. “There were 30 vandalism incidents at the school in the seven months leading up to the construction of the fence last December.”<sup>12</sup>
- “In the same period, neighbouring Elizabeth Grove Primary School has had a reduction in vandalism of 45 per cent, with no incidents recorded in the past two months.”<sup>12</sup>

As reported on Ten Eyewitness News (25/5/15), South Australian Education Minister Susan Close, visited Blackwood Primary School to inspect the school security fencing installed by Bluedog Fences in 2014 and announced a further \$1 million spend on upgrading school security for the coming 12 months. Ten News reported<sup>16</sup> that “The Reception to Year 7 school used to be a regular target of vandalism from graffiti to ripped out garden beds, but since this fence was installed a year ago the problem is almost gone.” School Principal, Phil Garner is reported as saying “Security wise, vandalism has actually decreased by 100%, as has graffiti”. The Minister reinforced the cost and social saving of school security fencing, saying “We used to have to spend about \$10 million a year fixing up schools after vandalism attacks, we’re now seeing a real decline to around \$2 million”.

In 2016, the government announced a further \$1 million would be spent to install security fences at a further additional six state school, bringing the total of schools fenced to 85.

## References

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