

Every second counts

The new school of thought on wearable panic buttons for K-12 schools, by Garrett Hoffman, Hardware Product Manager, Inovonics

The passage of Alyssa's Law in 2019 ushered in a new level of awareness for mandated wearable panic buttons in K-12 schools here in the US. Many schools worldwide are also facing this unfortunate reality given the ongoing occurrence of disruptive and threatening events.

As acts of violence in schools can be attributed to both internal and external threats, they can be hard to detect, predict and prevent. Although panic buttons are a reactionary solution, it is proven that they can dramatically reduce emergency response times during threatening situations. Faster response reduces potential harm to students, teachers and anyone on premises. During such events, every second counts – especially because lives are at stake.

The basic premise behind duress alarms is relatively simple – depress a button and help is on the way. However, there are two very important attributes of panic alarms that make them a practical and effective solution specifically for schools.

Better technology ensures better results

Panic buttons have been in use for a long time – one of the earliest applications



being in banks to alert police during robberies. These early devices were hard-wired and mounted in fixed locations, typically at each bank teller station. Tellers would press the button to trigger silent alarms that alerted authorities of a robbery in progress.

The ability to trigger an alarm was predicated on one's physical proximity to the fixed location of an alarm button, which presented an obvious shortcoming for mainstream applications.

The development of wireless, wearable panic buttons changed all that. Mobile panic buttons ushered in new applications across a wide range of organisations – including schools, hospitals, hotels, corporate and industrial facilities. In the case of schools, wearable panic buttons are capable of transforming teachers, administrators and staff workers into mobile sentries with the ability to instantaneously report incidents or potentially harmful events the moment trouble is detected.

To be effective in such a broad range of educational facilities with different construction characteristics requires advanced technology to be built into these wireless panic devices. Including:

- The ability to activate multiple types of alarm conditions enabling first responders to respond quickly and appropriately given the nature of the alarm
- Response affirmation indicators such as LEDs and/or vibration to confirm that an alarm has been sent and alert the

wearer to possible accidental activations

- Proven wireless transmission technology such as Inovonics EchoStream that utilises multi-channel signalling over different frequencies and long distances without interference to ensure that the alarm gets through to the appropriate head-end instantaneously
- Location services to indicate where an alarm has been activated within the school, making it faster and easier for first responders to pinpoint where the event is in progress

“Panic buttons with location services can help first responders with mustering.”

- Waterproof casings that allow devices to be worn in environments where they may be exposed to water or moisture, which would otherwise incapacitate such electronic devices
- Long battery life to ensure continuous operation at times when it's needed most

That's a lot of advanced technology to pack into a wearable panic device, which leads to the next important criterion to ensure the effectiveness of wearable duress solutions: User comfort.

The comfort factor

Simply stated, wearable panic buttons are only effective in schools when they are worn. The less intrusive the device is, the greater the probability users will wear it throughout the entire school day. Modern duress cards address this challenge with a sleek and lightweight design that is both comfortable and unobtrusive. Beyond aesthetic appeal, this is important for several reasons.

School personnel need to always wear their duress alarm when on premises. Leaving a duress alarm on one's desk increases the likelihood that it will be out of immediate reach when an event occurs. This is especially relevant when school staff are confronted by aggressive individuals; a fight breaks out on school grounds; or an accident occurs that requires medical attention.

Unobtrusive panic devices also help to reduce stress on impressionable young children by providing a quiet, discreet and reliable layer of security at their schools. Teachers can also take comfort knowing that help is available at the push of a button wherever they are within the school – inside classrooms, outdoor play areas, hallways or sports fields. And, in worst-case scenarios during evacuations, panic buttons with location services can help first responders with mustering, so they can easily and quickly account for individuals' or groups' whereabouts during emergencies.

Balancing form vs. function

Wearable panic buttons need to combine both modern notification capabilities and user comfort to be effective. The former ensures that the device performs on demand when and where it is needed, and the latter ensures that the device is comfortably wearable and within immediate reach for activation at the touch of a button.

Fortunately, panic notification solutions like the new duress card from Inovonics combine proven duress alarm performance with new levels of user comfort to help better protect children, their teachers, school staff and everyone else who enters their schools. ■

