

# Picture This: How to Establish an Effective School ID Card Program

*Many school districts are implementing ID card programs to address concerns about safety, efficiency, and convenience.*

By David Finkelstein



Advanced-technology cards (smart cards) can enable a wide range of additional capabilities on campus, such as monitoring attendance and monitoring and paying school fees. Off campus, the cards can prove student status for retail discount programs. Although students may not be required to display their cards at all times, they should always carry the card with them and be able to produce it on demand.

**Faculty and staff IDs.** Parents are increasingly conscious of school security and want schools to take steps to safeguard their children. An ID card policy that requires faculty and staff to display a photo ID at all times is a low-cost way to alleviate

**D**oes your school district have an ID card policy that everyone knows and follows? If yours is like most schools or districts, the honest answer is no. But today, schools around the country are implementing consistent ID card programs to address concerns about safety, efficiency, and convenience. A well-thought-out ID card program leads to greater security and smoother operations throughout the school and should thus be a priority.

The district should issue ID cards to three main groups: students, faculty and staff, and visitors. Let's review the objectives of an ID card program for each of these groups.

**Student IDs.** Students should have photo ID cards to prove their student status on and off campus. On campus, cards verify that young people who are on the grounds are currently enrolled in the school and that they have legitimate access to school transportation and to campus buildings.

many parental concerns.

**Visitor IDs.** A robust ID card policy should require all adults to display a badge while on campus, including visitors. Visitors should always be checked in and issued a temporary visitor card, whether a one-time-use badge or a reusable plastic badge. All visitors should be required to display their badges throughout their stay.

## Paper or Plastic?

To be effective, photo ID cards for students and staff should be hard to duplicate or tamper with, which immediately eliminates any printed paper or traditional laminated photo ID cards. Students are clever "hackers" and can quickly figure out how to duplicate or falsify cards if possible. It's not difficult to break into a laminated card, replace the photo, and make it look as good as new.

Therefore, a professional PVC plastic ID card printed by a high-quality specialized printer is the most effective choice. This card looks like a driver's license. The photo

is printed directly on the plastic and can't be removed or altered without destroying the card. A high-quality card with a clear photo of the student can be used as a "flash pass" to be shown to faculty or security personnel upon demand.

Many schools also include holographic overlays and other security features on their cards to guard against fraud.

## Beyond Recognition

ID cards can do more than identify someone. For example, school ID cards can include a magnetic strip or bar code linked to the student record so he or she can use the card to check books out of the library. These technologies are inexpensive and widespread, allowing the school district to take an initial step toward automating student identification. But the limitations inherent in these technologies, and the quickly declining costs of more advanced technologies, make smart cards worthy of consideration.

Smart cards are common on college campuses and are finding their way into the K–12 environment. Smart cards contain a chip and a tiny invisible antenna that allow them to communicate securely with card readers to access a variety of services on campus and off, such as opening specific doors during certain times.

Smart cards can be used to record attendance in class and at sporting events. They can also be used to record who gets on and off a school bus. An authorized administrator can view these records online to determine whether students are—or aren't—where they are supposed to be and to reassure anxious parents or to alert the right people if a problem arises.

More advanced cards can be used for student or staff payments, on campus in the cafeteria and in vending machines, or even off campus. Furthermore, some schools have implemented smart ID cards that can be used as passes on the local public transit network.

## Key Considerations

School administrators who are considering their current and future ID card procedures should develop a program that can grow with them over time as their needs evolve. A plain ID card may be adequate for today's requirements, but it may limit options in the years ahead.

Safety and security should be the primary consideration and ultimate goal of an ID card program. A thoughtful, open discussion among staff members should lay out the current and future needs to help ensure a safe learning environment free of worry and fear. Then, the staff should consider using cards to increase efficiency of operations for the school and its stakeholders.

Finally, schools can consider other factors, such as ease of use, nonacademic uses, and display of school pride. Even public schools need to market themselves these days, and professionally produced cards that

incorporate a logo and the school's colors promote the school's "brand" in a subtle, effective manner.

The implementation of a new school ID card program can be a great catalyst for revisiting some of the traditional ways of accomplishing tasks, such as in the library or the cafeteria, with an eye toward modernizing and updating with 21st-century technologies.

## ID Production

When considering how to produce the actual card, the district should consider such factors as taking photos, printing cards, replacing lost cards, and so forth. Most schools have three alternatives for producing their ID cards:

**In-house.** Some schools take the laminated card route. The equipment is inexpensive, but, as noted above, laminated cards are insecure, not very durable, and dated. Other schools choose to invest in the specialized printers and software necessary to produce solid plastic cards. However, the duty cycle is never a good fit because of the large-volume requirement at the beginning of the year, which may require three or more printers to complete, with little volume throughout the rest of the year.

Although this route gives schools control, the ongoing requirements for staff training, maintenance, and supplies often make in-house printing a very expensive, time-consuming alternative.

**Local provider.** Some schools contract for services from a local printing company. Such companies generally do not specialize in ID cards, so delays can be long and the companies are often unable to meet the ongoing need for individual cards throughout the year.

**Cloud-based outsourcing.** Recently, outsourcing the production of professional cards has become far simpler with the advent of web and cloud-based services. Today, a number of online card-production services can provide fast delivery at a very low cost. The school simply uploads the photos and student names to the card company, which prints the cards on demand, with some services even guaranteeing same-day printing. The school can choose simple flash cards, add smart card features, or even put quick-response codes on the cards.

What's the best way to go? You need to compare all the hard and soft costs of each alternative. With tight school budgets, buying card-printing equipment can be a tough sell, so the choice often comes down to local or web-based providers.

School districts face competing demands for enhanced security versus myriad other items competing for limited resources. But many schools have found that adopting photo ID cards for students and staff offers so many advantages that it's well worth the relatively modest cost of a well-designed program.

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