

12/97

International Dark-Sky Association - Information Sheet 54

Dark Campus Programs Reduce Vandalism and Save Money

Conventional wisdom suggests that light reduces crime. That's why outdoor lights are often called "security lights". School districts across the U.S. are turning conventional wisdom on its head by turning off lights on school grounds.

The results have been impressive. Annual energy savings can add up to hundreds of dollars per school. Significant decreases in vandalism have been documented since the "Dark Campus" policies have gone into effect. Here are three examples.

The San Antonio (Texas) School District was one of the first to try this idea back in 1973. The annual cost of repairing damage caused by vandalism dropped from \$160,000 to \$41,000 in just a few years.

"I remember as a kid, we never hung around in the dark," says Sam Wolf, director of security for the district. "We hung around a street light. We wanted to see who was with us." The thrill of vandalism is partly in seeing a window shatter or watching paint cover a wall. Darkness takes away the thrill.

The 4-J School District in Eugene, Oregon has eight schools participating in their Dark Campus program. Since it began as an experiment in 1989, vandalism has virtually disappeared in certain problem schools.

At one school annual energy savings totaled \$300. That was just icing on the cake compared to time saved on repairing and cleaning up damage caused by vandalism. The district also researched their insurance requirement and found that turning off all the lights, including exit signs, was okay when nobody was in a facility. In California, the Livermore Joint Unified School District reports energy savings of about ten percent along with a slight decrease in vandalism. Cupertino Union School District reported that vandalism dropped 29 percent, while energy savings totaled \$8,190 during the 1981-82 school year. For both districts, the campus blackout was part of a larger anti-vandalism strategy.

Why Dark Campus Works

There's no scientific evidence that night time blackouts cause a reduction in vandalism. However, it seems to work well, especially in upper and middle class neighborhoods. When everyone gets used to dark school grounds, lights of any kind will arouse suspicion.

To be effective, turn off all the lights to make the campus as dark as possible. This may be difficult to do in some buildings, and rewiring may be required.

To make Dark Campus work you have to do more than just turn out the lights. Communication is the key component of the program. You need to be sure that students, staff, neighbors, and police know what you're doing. Expect skepticism. Bring proof that the idea works.

The 4-J School District developed the following checklist that will help you cover all the bases.

Checklist for Success

Define the Policy

- Set hours for the blackout; 11:00 PM to 6:00 AM is often used.
- Instruct students and staff that the building is off limits during dark hours.

Implement The Program

- Inform local law enforcement officials. Get their views and try to address their concerns.
- Inform school district officials.
- Communicate with neighbors and parents. Informal meeting, flyers, and school newsletters are a few methods for getting the word out. Emphasize that any lights seen during dark hours should be reported to the police.
- Post prominent signs on all sides of the campus listing the dark hours and a police telephone number to call.
- Block access to all foot and vehicle traffic.
- Install lights controlled by occupancy sensors and audible alarms in areas with valuable equipment, such as computer labs.

Track The Program

- Keep notes on starting dates, communications, etc.
- Record results, including energy savings and occurrences of vandalism.
- Promote your success.

The above material is copyrighted by and used with the permission of Iris Communications, Inc., 258 E. 10th Ave. #E, Eugene, OR 97401. It is quoted directly from an article in *Building Operator*, Number 9, p. 7, 1991. We thank them for permission to use the material.

© **IDA Inc.**, 3225 N. First Ave., Tucson, AZ 85719-2103 USA
Telephone: 1-520-293-3198 Fax: 520-293-3192 E-mail: ida@darksky.org Web:
www.darksky.org