SmartPass »

Digital Hall Passes:
The Future of Student Movement Management

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Introduction

The notion of 500+ teens and pre-teens gathered in one building may sound overwhelming to many, but it's just another day for K-12 school administrators, educators, and staff.

The adults standing in loco parentis for hours every weekday appreciate the responsibility of creating a safe, healthy, and productive environment where students can focus on their studies. Those responsibilities increase in scope and complexity when students enter middle and high school.

"Behaviorally, adolescence is associated with volatile emotions and boundary-testing behavior as individuals explore and assert personal identity, learn to navigate peer relationships, and transition to independence," according to the American Psychological Association.

Educators are very familiar with typical boundary-testing behaviors in school, like loitering in the halls and congregating in bathrooms, vandalism, vaping and more. Such behaviors seem to have amplified as a result of the pandemic, exacerbating the challenges for faculty and staff.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 87% of public schools reported that COVID-19 negatively impacted students' social-emotional development during the 2021-2022 school year. Additionally, 83% of public schools agreed or strongly agreed that students' behavioral development has also been negatively impacted, with 49% citing rowdiness outside of the classroom and 24% citing vandalism.

So, while overseeing students as they navigate classrooms, cafeterias, and corridors is an every-day affair for educators, it has become an increasingly nuanced part of how schools operate.

This guide reviews the challenges facing schools today, the shortcomings of traditional methods, and the fast-growing movement among schools to utilize enterprise-level technology to improve how they manage and monitor student movement in schools.

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Evolving Challenges of Student Movement

With that as context, the challenges associated with student movement are evolving rapidly in schools; several themes have emerged among the thousands of schools currently using systems to improve student movement, underscoring why this movement is taking root nation-wide.

Loitering and Congregating

A hall pass to visit the restroom is seen by some students as a free pass to skip out on class time. Even students actually going to the restroom can be an issue for teachers trying to keep students focused on instruction and/or removed from potentially harmful situations. As reported by The Washington Post, "School bathrooms have typically been hot spots for student misbehavior," said Kenneth S. Trump, president of National School Safety and Security Services. "Students have always used hall passes to stay out of class or smoke in the bathroom."

A major detriment to conventional hall passes is that students coordinate their timing for being excused from class to meet up with friends in restrooms or elsewhere in the building. Paper or lanyard-type hall passes can't serve as an encounter prevention tool to keep specific groups of students from meeting up outside of class.

This is not simply an issue of preventing disruptive behavior when conspirators gather, it is also essential for ensuring safety by preventing bully/victim encounters.

While written hall passes can be doled out one-at-a-time in each classroom, potentially limiting such congregating, even one student choosing to loiter can cause a backlog of students who have legitimate reasons to be excused. Restricting all student movement because of a few troublemakers impacts students going to the library for research, to a lab, or other valid trips around campus.

Aside from the behavioral issues, loitering can directly impact a student's academic life, creating a detrimental cycle as they miss instruction, fall behind, and then react by taking more breaks.
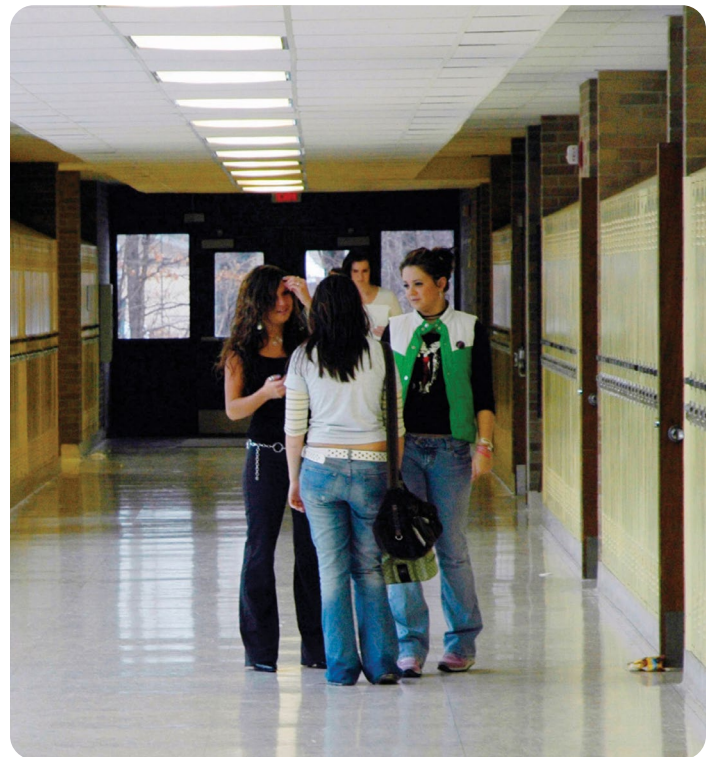
Evolving Challenges of Student Movement

Vaping

The Centers for Disease Control identifies schools as "ground zero" for the youth e-cigarette epidemic. The 2022 National Youth Tobacco Survey (NYTS) on e-cigarette use among U.S. youth found that 14.1% (2.14 million) of high school students and 3.3% (380,000) of middle school students reported current e-cigarette use. Students addicted to e-cigarettes may find lasting an entire class period without vaping to be a challenge. Restroom breaks offer the opportunity they need to vape without being observed.

Texas districts have installed vape sensors to monitor air quality and catch vaping students, but that is a reactionary, after-the-fact intervention that does little to preempt such behavior. While it can be good for disciplinary measures, sensors alone have yet to reliably prevent this behavior from happening in the first place.

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Vandalism

In 2021, NPR reported that students were destroying or stealing items at their schools, often in the school bathrooms, for what school administrators and police blamed on a TikTok trend known as "devious licks."

Reports emerged from across the country: a stolen soap dispenser and damaged sink in Florida; intentionally clogged toilets and mirrors and soap dispensers ripped from walls in California; destruction and red dye staining the bathrooms and a teacher's belongings stolen in Arkansas; ceiling tiles and partitions destroyed in Tennessee.

While peer pressure combined with social media can easily spark a nationwide campaign of vandalism, individual acts are all too common, costing schools both in terms of property damage and in terms of needless distraction for students and staff alike.

Even as teachers monitor and interrupt disruptive and destructive behavior when students are in their classrooms, the time students spend between class periods and outside of direct instruction is an increasing concern for educators.

The challenges stemming from these changing dynamics are as widespread as they are complex, with traditional methods falling far short of what educators actually need for today's schools and classrooms.

Shortcomings of the Analog Hall Pass

The challenges that schools are facing, as noted above, are indicative of why the conventional approach to approving and monitoring student movement throughout the day is no longer working. Namely, the traditional hall pass is past its prime.

Hall passes have been the time-honored method of authorizing students to leave the classroom, but they are an analog solution and not equipped to help schools systemically address challenges related to student movement. Over time, schools have used a variety of paper-based methods to manage student movement, but they all come with drawbacks.

Pass Integrity

Paper passes are too easily copied/forged and are prone to getting lost. They may need to be filled out for each use which can eat into teacher time. Plastic, credit card style passes on a lanyard cannot be personalized, and as many schools discovered during the pandemic, they could not be shared/reused without disinfection.

Lack of Visibility

Paper/plastic records don't provide visibility into student movement for administrative staff. In an interview for Campus Safety Magazine, Cobun Zweifel-Keegan, a data privacy lawyer and managing director of the International Association of Privacy Professionals says, "with paper records, you don't necessarily have a central system so it may be difficult to track in a school where students aren't in a single room all day. It would be difficult to track how many times students are 'abusing the privilege' of being able to go out of the classroom. And then, of course, it'd be harder to identify when vandalism and things like that happen. It takes more legwork from the administrators."

Ongoing Disruption

Time-consuming, teacher-administered passes can interrupt instruction for the entire class. One study, The Big Problem With Little Interruptions to Classroom Learning found that "disruptions to lesson momentum often required teachers to spend additional time restating directions, reviewing earlier content, and reenergizing students. Thus, interruptions can negatively affect both the potential time for learning in school and the amount of material teachers can cover."

Ineffective Emergency Notification

In the event of an emergency like a fire or intruder, teachers may have to rely on sign-out sheets to identify which students are in the hallways and away from a teacher. Administrators and first responders need to quickly find students who are not in their expected location, and when every second counts a decentralized paper list is ineffective at best.

With all these negatives, it's no surprise that schools are looking to technology for a better way. Enterprise-level systems to manage student movement are proliferating. Consequently, schools are increasingly considering how a technology-first, systems-based approach to managing student movement can impact teaching and learning time, student wellness and safety, facilities maintenance, and even school culture.

How Digital Hall Passes Work

While every digital hall pass system is unique, there are certain elements of functionality that most systems contain.

Typically, a staff member or student will create a digital hall pass on a device, such as a smartphone or school-issued laptop. Passes identify the student's specific destination, like the closest restroom, the library, or a specific teacher's room. This is an important contrast to the standard "not in class" option, often the only one within a conventional process.

Rules can be set to control how many passes can be approved for a particular student, to block certain students from meeting up outside of class, or to limit the number of students authorized to be in a specific location. Automating these rules saves teachers from having to continuously monitor hall pass activity.

Dashboards allow teachers to see all active passes, including information on where students are coming from and where they're heading. Administrators can view key metrics and analytics for enhanced school situational awareness.

By enabling students to stay on task and document their travels through the hallways, digital hall passes help school staff prevent vandalism and loitering and effectively eliminate unsafe student encounters. Meanwhile, these systems help document student activity and contribute to reduced class time disruption, with a range of value-added benefits for all stakeholders.

How Digital Hall Passes Work

Benefits of a Digital Hall Pass System

All stakeholders within a school setting benefit from the capabilities and security offered by smarter, digital hall passes.

Stakeholder Benefits of Digital Hall Pass Systems

Education Stakeholder	Benefits
District Administration	• Administrator-level dashboard and reports • Data for all schools/students downloadable for analytics • Helps students learn self-regulation, decision-making, and accountability • More eco-friendly and cost effective than paper passes or passbooks
Principal / Building Leader	• A safer, better-managed school • Streamlined processes that free up staff bandwidth • Quick and easy way to know where students are expected to be • Weekly Summaries of what's happening with SmartPass in the school
Teacher	• Digital hall passes created and approved in seconds • Less disruption of instruction • Better classroom management without extra work
Teacher's Aide / Hall Monitor	• Organization and differentiation of hall passes by grade level, building area, activity or team • Ability to identify if a pass is valid with just a glance • Streamlined attendance processes coupled with reliable student data • Scheduling of recurring future passes • Management of daily procedures, including late arrivals and early dismissals
Counselor	• Alerts counselors to student behavior patterns • Signals opportunity for student support and intervention
School Resource Officer	• Encounter prevention to prevent groups of students from meeting in the hallways • Tool for monitoring student parking lot activity
IT Staff	• Designed for the school environment • Easy integration with existing student information systems • Compatibility with both existing 1:1 and BYOD devices • High security standards for student data (FERPA and COPPA compliant) • Data export data for analytics • Simple implementation • Outages/uptime report
Student	• Students stay on task and focused • Improves academic outcomes • Creates a culture of student accountability

How Digital Hall Passes Work

Overarching Benefits of Digital Hall Pass Systems

In addition to these use cases that impact individual stakeholders, schools around the country cited the impact that systems like SmartPass are having in a variety of ways, including:

- Preventing students from wandering around the hallways
- Ability to get a list of active passes during school emergencies
- Identifying vandalism
- Combating vaping in bathrooms
- Scheduling passes for the guidance department

- Better process for tardy and/or early dismissal passes
- Enabling special education appointments (Speech, PT, OT)
- Student pass reports for parent-teacher conferences
- Passes for lunch detention, after-school detention

Schools Win With a Digital Hall Pass System

While digital hall passes are a relatively new technology, they have already proven their value in real-life implementations. Here are some examples from SmartPass customers.

Corralling Hallway Wanderers

Roy Woodring, Eighth Grade American History teacher at Northwestern Middle School in West Salem, Ohio, and the other teachers noticed a disturbing pattern: students were using paper hallway passes to "game the system" and meander about the campus. The teachers found that students would ask for permission to visit another teacher or space on campus but would not arrive at that destination; rather, they would be in the hallways or end up in another location without any way for the permitting teacher to monitor their student's progress and whereabouts.

Similarly, students would visit restrooms for extended periods of time in multiple class periods throughout the day. During intervention and study hall times, teachers noted a "mass exodus" of students using that time to visit lockers, restrooms, and other locations throughout the school. All of these visits added up to a significant loss of instructional time.

Within just a few weeks of implementing SmartPass, a new pattern emerged: the hallways were clearing. Woodring and his colleagues noted fewer hallway wanderers during class times. As more and more staff used SmartPass with fidelity, they found that they were better able to regain control of the hallway traffic. Students know that they are accountable for their time out of class and are clearing the hallways quickly. Study hall periods are no longer a revolving door and students are using that time effectively.

Schools Win With a Digital Hall Pass System

Affecting a Cultural Shift

The administrative team at Pennsbury High School in Fairless Hills, PA is responsible for 3,000 students and must monitor tens of thousands of unique student movements throughout the day. Paper passes and sign-in/-out clipboards weren't enough to keep up with students' movements. The school noticed a rise in disciplinary issues, ongoing concerns about student safety, and a recurring theme of lost instruction time.

Shortly after the introduction of SmartPass, behavior incidents in hallways started to decrease. Pennsbury HS now has fewer issues with vandalism and unsafe student behaviors. On top of that, the school is experiencing a culture shift to one of student accountability.

- Teachers know that students are responsible for making pass requests. They know that students are responsible for their time out of the classroom.

- Administrators know that they are guiding students toward better decision-making by limiting encounters between high-flyer students during times of limited supervision.

- Parents support the program because of real data about lost instructional time and fewer behavior problems.

Students know that they still have the ability to go from one place to another on campus and that the expectation about actually getting to that destination will be enforced.

Preventing Disruptive Encounters

A fellow teacher at Pennsbury High School, Megan Swope, a Social Studies teacher, found one of the most useful features of SmartPass is the ability to manage "Encounter Prevention," which helps avert disruptive or unsafe meet-ups. Seeing a drop in incidents thanks to this feature is starting to improve the overall school culture and climate. In addition, the school-wide data reports available to administrators provide a clear picture of student behavior and add a new level of accountability to students in discussions about their academic and overall success.

> "A Social Studies teacher, found one of the most useful features of SmartPass is the ability to manage **'Encounter Prevention,'** which helps avert disruptive or unsafe meet-ups."

Smarter Management of Student Movement is Here

As schools re-evaluate old, outdated workflows, they see the upside of systemic, safe, and secure digital hall pass solutions. School leaders can see student movement trends and their impact on campus culture, streamline processes for teachers, and empower agency in students.

SmartPass is the leader in digital hall pass solutions. Used by 1,000+ schools, the solution was built by students and quickly proved its usefulness for safety and contact tracing. Since then, the development team has solicited school administration and student feedback to improve the SmartPass app, a method that has enabled the software to expand across hundreds of schools and become an indispensable tool for student movement management.

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