

High-tech hall monitoring in schools makes some uneasy

By Stateline.org, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.12.14

Word Count **783**



Dawn and Mike Cantrall's daughter, a seventh-grader at Brittan Elementary School, at her Sutter, California, home, wearing the radio frequency identification tag that the school asked her to wear, Feb. 8, 2005. The Cantralls filed a formal complaint against the school board, protesting the tag. AP/Max Whittaker

WASHINGTON — Does your school know where you are at the moment? In class? On the bus? Paying for lunch in the cafeteria?

Principals in thousands of schools know the answer. The information comes from technology that keeps track of students through their identification cards or scanners that recognize a student's fingerprint or eyeball.

Schools use them to take attendance and let parents know where their children get off the school bus, and even speed up lunch lines.

The technology is supposed to make schools safer and more efficient. However, they are controversial. Several states are now banning or limiting their use in schools, as worries increase over privacy of student information and computer security.

Easily Recognizable

This year, Florida became the first state to ban the use of biometric identification in its schools. Biometric technology uses people's unique characteristics, such as a fingerprint, palm or eyeball, to recognize them. In Kansas now, biometric information cannot be collected without the agreement of students or their parents. New Hampshire, Colorado and North Carolina have banned schools from collecting and storing biometric information in student records.

New Hampshire and Missouri lawmakers said schools cannot require students to use ID cards with radio frequency identification (RFID) technology. RFID technology tracks students by badges or tags with radio chips. The chips either send out a radio signal or are read by a scanner. RFID tags are also used by the government and businesses for security and tracking packages.

The Technology Makes Many Nervous

The laws reflect a growing worry among parents and lawmakers about the new technology. They are questioning what information is being collected and how that information is used and protected.

In all, 36 states considered 110 laws this year on the issue, according to Data Quality Campaign, a group in favor of using the new technology to improve student achievement. At least 39 of the proposed laws involved biometric information, and 14 of them passed.

"Technology is moving so fast," said Paige Kowalski, who works for Data Quality Campaign. "I think that's why you're seeing these new laws. I think people are nervous about it. It's new."

She thinks there is a desire to use technology, but to take it slow. "We want to know exactly how it's being used ... so we don't sacrifice too much privacy."

When Is It Information Overload?

Nobody knows how many of the nation's school districts use the technology to track students, but schools have used them for years.

Jay Fry, the head of identiMetrics, said biometric technology is used in more than 1,000 school districts in 40 states.

"It's more secure from a privacy standpoint than a student ID," Fry said. Student IDs include the student's name, picture and school.

Fry came up with the idea of using the technology in schools in 2002 when he was a middle school principal in Illinois. Students often did not have enough time to eat their lunches and lost their lunch money or their IDs. "You can't lose your finger," he said.

Elizabeth Hunger is with the Security Industry Association. She said the RFID technology is more common in schools where badges are read at school doors, on buses or at school events so educators know where students are.

But some lawmakers question whether schools really need these kinds of tools that keep track of students. They say that keeping such close eye on students through technology is just another example of government control.

“This is a technology that is very difficult to limit and to secure,” said Missouri State Senator Ed Emery. He proposed the new law that limits how school districts can use RFID in Missouri. Parents can now choose to keep their children from using RFID.

Parents Need Collection Details

Florida State Senator Dorothy Hukill stepped in when a school system began a program to scan the students' retinas on school buses without their parents' permission. The retina is a layer of tissue lining the inner eye.

Hukill proposed the law that bans the use of biometric identification in Florida schools.

“You don’t need to collect biometric information to buy a hot dog in the school cafeteria or check out a library book,” she said.

Hukill said she is not opposed to technology, but she is concerned about keeping children's personal information safe. “And once you collect the information,” she said, “there is no rolling back.”

Rather than outlaw the technology, Kowalski, of the Data Quality Campaign suggested lawmakers focus on openness. Parents should know how the technology is used, what information is collected about their children and how the information is protected.

“Were you as a lawmaker to prohibit it, you may be taking something useful away,” she said.