Privacy vs. Security

Are you prepared for the thorny issues surrounding student surveillance?

By David Rapp

A lot of school administrators are looking into installing security cameras in their districts. They want to keep their students safe. They want to keep tabs on people entering and leaving their schools. They want to cut down on vandalism and theft, and they want to do it now.

What's the urgency? Look at these numbers: During the 2005–06 school year, according to the most recent statistics available from the U.S. Department of Education, 86 percent of public schools nationwide reported that one or more serious violent incidents, thefts, or other crimes had occurred at their school, for a total of roughly 2.2 million crimes. That works out to about one crime reported for every 20 students. And that doesn't include vandalism and graffiti: Nearly 100,000 incidents of vandalism are reported in the United States public school system every year.

Cameras are expensive, with some high-end systems costing $500,000 or more, plus annual maintenance fees. But some administrators seem to think that installing security cameras will solve their problems. Even administrators in low-crime districts want the cameras, if only to deter potential crime. Anecdotally, cameras appear to be effective at detecting and deterring crime, though hard numbers are difficult to come by.

Installing cameras, however, can be controversial. There have been protests and legal action surrounding camera installation at schools nationwide, and there are a number of issues to consider before signing off on surveillance. What problems are you trying to solve with cameras? If you do install cameras, what kind of atmosphere will it create at your school? Most importantly, what do parents and students think?

When word got out that administrators at the Seaholm and Groves high schools in Oakland County, Michigan, were considering installing security cameras, it led students to organize the group Students Against Security Cameras (SASC). Its members have attended school board meetings to protest the plan, which they feel would be an unnecessary expense and would promote an atmosphere of distrust in the schools.

SASC students even have a Facebook page spelling out their concerns, with more than 850 members so far. At press time, the school board had yet to make a decision about security cameras.

Terry Piper, the principal at Seaholm High School in Birmingham, Michigan, feels the time is right for security cameras at his school. After all, dozens of schools in their county have already done it, and with some success. “There are 30 high schools in Oakland County, and every single one of them has security cameras except Seaholm and Groves,” Piper says. “They’ve seen thefts go down. They’ve been able to solve instances of vandalism on occasion, and there have been student altercations where they’ve been helpful. They also serve as a deterrent, so you never know how many things might have happened if you hadn’t had them.”

Some of the student group’s arguments, Piper maintains, rest on incorrect assumptions —for example, that the cameras will be prohibitively expensive. “We haven’t taken any bids yet,” he says. “They don’t know much about school funding, so they don’t know that it’s not going to take away from instructional programs. There’s a separate budget for that kind of capital outlay.”

Piper is convinced that security cameras are a valuable tool for combatting petty theft. Many such thefts take place in locker rooms; though cameras are barred from locker rooms and bathrooms, Piper plans to install cameras outside Seaholm’s locker rooms, as well as in the main hallway, and outside at the main entrance. The question is: How do you determine whom you’re going to question if you’ve got video of 50 kids walking out of a locker room following a theft? Do you interview them all?

Shelli Weisberg, the legislative director at the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan, asked a Michigan principal that same question, and she found that it all boiled down to profiling. “He actually said, ‘We know who the bad kids are,’” she says. This made her wonder: Well, then, why do you need the camera?

Weisberg, with the Michigan ACLU, has worked with students across the state to fight security cameras in schools, and she doubts the necessity of cameras in many schools. She points out that many of the schools that install the cameras tend to be in well-to-do districts, with some of the lowest crime rates. Ann Arbor Pioneer High School, which plans to install 53 cameras on its campus, is a prime example. “Ann Arbor does not have a high crime rate,” Weisberg says. “They’re a very affluent district, so there’s a lot of eyes in the hall. [Administrators] did say, anecdotally, that they thought [cameras] made people feel safer. But students said it made them feel like they were being watched.”

So the ACLU assisted the students in their fight, and provided them with academic studies in the US and UK that argued that surveillance cameras had little effect on crime. (You can read about these studies at the ACLU site.) “The students did a good job of using the research we gave them to develop their arguments—a lot of Big Brother–type arguments, asserting their due-process rights as students—because they are in schools to learn how to be adults,” Weisberg says.

The students’ “Big Brother” fears may not be completely off the mark. At a high school in Novi, Michigan, for example, administrators don’t only monitor the cameras themselves —they also allow police access to the footage. And public schools in Demarest, New

Jersey, have gone a step further: In 2007, they began allowing police to monitor live feeds from school security cameras. “It concerns me that schools would, without thinking about due process, simply turn over access to the police,” Weisberg says. “I think it’s a matter of schools looking very myopically at how they think their students are safe, and not really thinking about the consequences of it.”

The danger, she says, is that with cameras recording every student infraction, more and more activities in schools will become criminalized. A scuffle between two kids in a hallway, which once would have been solved with detention or suspension, could now been seen as criminal activity—especially if the police are involved. “Kids are not only getting kicked out of school, but also sent to the police,” Weisberg says. “There’s this tendency, with all of this stuff on tape, to send more kids to jail.”

Schools need to have a compelling reason for the cameras before installing them, Weisberg says, or they may be abused. “I think schools are worried—they have to keep their student body safe, and they have to keep parents assured that their children are safe,” she says. “The general public seems to think that a camera means safety. It does bring in a slippery slope, because there is going to be a tendency to use the camera tapes to look at every little thing.”

Seaholm’s Piper points out that there have been cameras in his schools’ parking lots for a decade, without protest or problems. “I’ve asked students, ‘Do you know of anybody whose rights or privacy has been violated by those cameras watching you come in and out of the building?’” he says. “They said no. I said, ‘So what makes you think that having cameras inside the doorways, when we already have them outside the doorways, is going to make us change the way we do business?’ Their arguments were more emotional than logical.”

Weisberg grants that security cameras can be useful tools, if used sensibly. “I think the ACLU and the students agree that there may be room at schools to have cameras at entrance doors,” she says. “I think everyone’s concerned about who has access to schools, especially elementary schools. But it’s worth thinking about what you’re trying to achieve.”

When administrators consider installing security cameras, it’s crucial to involve parents and students in the process.

Administrators who don’t involve them can create huge problems for themselves down the road. A few examples:
During a 2003 girls’ basketball game at Livingston Middle School in Overton County, Tennessee, visiting team members noticed a security camera in the girls’ locker room. It turned out the camera had recorded images of the team members in their undergarments when they changed their clothes. Several other students had been similarly videotaped over the previous months. The scandal led to Brannum v. Overton County School Board, a lawsuit on behalf of 24 students. In a key legal decision last year, the U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that a school may not install security cameras inside locker rooms, where students have an expectation of privacy.

In late 2007, student newspaper reporters uncovered the fact that the principal at Newton South High School in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, had installed five security

cameras outside a locker room without informing faculty, the school committee, or the rest of the community. It caused an uproar among committee members, teachers, students, and parents—a situation that any administrator would rather avoid.

Kenneth Trump, the president of National School Safety and Security Services, a Cleveland, Ohio–based consulting firm, stresses the need for open communication. "There has to be an education process by the administration, to explain the purpose of the technology to parents and students and staff, and how it fits into the overall school-safety program," he says. "The communication piece is one that can easily turn around and bite school administrators, if they haven't done a good job at informing people on the front end."

Trump tells administrators that an effective safety program is less about technology than it is about people. "Technology is an extra tool, and technology is only as good as the human element behind it," he says. "The first and best line of defense is always a well-trained, highly alert staff and student body who will recognize strangers on campus, or report rumors, or report a student having a weapon on campus, and so on." If you don't have the school community in your corner as part of a comprehensive safety and security policy, then even the most sophisticated security camera system won't be effective.

Administrators also need to address the idea that security cameras bring up a lot of hot-button emotional issues, such as child safety and privacy. "You tend to find people are on one extreme or the other on this issue," says Trump. "Either they're totally anti-equipment, or they believe totally that equipment is the solution and cure-all for everything. Neither is necessarily the right position."

In any case, parents should be kept well informed about every step of the process. In Trump's experience, he says, "a majority of parents tend to support it, and like the presence of those cameras, because it provides a clear indicator that there's some additional measures to protect their children."

Michigan ACLU's Weisberg agrees that parents tend to go along with a decision to install cameras, but she isn't sure that's a good thing. "You know, most people trust their schools, and they trust that they're doing the right things by their students—so there's great leeway given to an administrator's request," she says. "Parents don't like to fight that. So I'm particularly proud of the students who take on that fight—and, hopefully, it helps enlighten the school boards and administrators in terms of what they're doing and what they're spending their money on."

As you weigh whether to install security cameras, it pays to listen to students, parents, and faculty. If you engage people one-on-one and address their concerns about safety and privacy, you may be able to make everyone in the community a part of your security plan. You may find that you only need a few cameras—or none at all. In the end, it's all about keeping students safe. And that's something everyone can agree on.

A Question of Trust

Ronald D. Stephens is the executive director of the National School Safety Center, an independent nonprofit that focuses on school crime prevention and safe-school planning.

As a former teacher and assistant superintendent, he shared his views on security cameras with Scholastic Administrator.

First and foremost, schools have to ask hard questions about what kind of climate they want to create, Stephens says. “When they put a four-way camera in the intersection I go through on my way to work every day, I wasn’t pleased about that. It tends to say, ‘Hey, we don’t trust you.’” Many students, he adds, feel the same way about cameras in schools.
“How do we create a climate that’s conducive to education without making the place look like a juvenile detention facility?” Stephens says it has to be a decision that is well thought through and that involves students, parents, and the community.

Stephens also cautions against seeing cameras as a quick fix. Cameras don’t stop all crimes, he warns, and he uses the example of Red Lake, Minnesota, where a 16-year-old high school student shot and killed five students, a teacher, and an unarmed security guard in 2005. “They had camera surveillance, they had a safe-school plan, they had metal [detectors],” he says. “They had two security officers at the front door. But the student still came in, overpowered them, and still committed those heinous acts.” But he understands why cameras are so appealing, especially when high-profile school violence hits the news. “People want to do something after a crisis, and sometimes they pick the thing that is tangible, visible and easy to measure.”

Cameras work best, notes Stephens, when they are deployed to take on a specific, here-and-now problem. “I was working with a school district in a midwestern state,” he says. “These kids would come up to the school’s double-entry doors with their Jeeps, run a chain through the door handles, hook it up to the back bumper, and pull the doors off. We told the district, ‘Put in a surveillance camera. Do it until you find your culprit, and then you can pull it out.’ What they found was that when they put the surveillance cameras in, vandalism at the school went down by 95 percent.”

Students do not shed their rights at the schoolhouse doors, Stephens warns. “If the school does something that does not use common sense or good judgment, they will ultimately have to answer for that in the courts,” he says. “Let’s be thoughtful about what we do and how we do it.”