



Surveillance cameras keep watch over schools

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Ever have the feeling you were being watched?

Well, if you were in a local school building, then the chances are pretty good that you actually were. (Or at least that a surveillance camera was recording your movements, in case you were up to no good.)

The nationwide trend of installing cameras in and around school buildings has taken off in the Lower Hudson Valley, where school leaders say they are beefing up security to protect students and safeguard school property.

It is a move that administrators say first became popular after the Columbine High School massacre of 1999 and attracted more serious attention following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The recent shootings at Virginia Tech have also weighed into the discussion about security cameras on campus.

"The main purpose behind them is preventative," said Ronald Wilson, assistant superintendent for the Carmel school district, which has more than a dozen cameras at its high school and is adding more during the summer with the help of state aid. "We feel that just the fact that they're there helps prevent students from doing things and getting into trouble they might otherwise be involved in."

Not everyone, however, is thrilled with the seemingly constant oversight.

The New York Civil Liberties Union has spoken out against the use of surveillance cameras in schools, saying the benefits are often far less significant than they're cracked up to be. The group is also concerned about who has access to the tapes and what is done with them.

"When video surveillance is used in school, it raises real questions about what measures are in place to safeguard student privacy," said Donna Lieberman, the NYCLU's executive director.

"I think school is supposed to be a safe haven for students, where they're comfortable enough to buckle down and learn," she said. "But if they have to worry constantly about being captured on tape, and that the tape is being used for who knows what, it may well undermine the educational environment."

The National Center for Education Statistics said the percentage of students who observed the use of security cameras in their schools jumped to 58 percent in 2005 from 39 percent in 2001.

At Briarcliff High School, Principal James Kaishian said the district was "trying to avoid the Big Brother syndrome" by keeping many of its cameras around the perimeter of the campus, as opposed to monitoring

every hallway.

The school installed surveillance cameras after the Columbine shootings and has continued to upgrade since then. Some of the newer cameras produce images that are clear enough to discern facial features, even at night.

"The cameras have done a great deal to make people feel safe," Kaishian said. "But I think you increase anxiety when people feel like their every movement is being watched."

Educators say they have turned to the cameras for information on everything from fender benders in the parking lot to scuffles on the playground to theft from the classrooms. One principal, who happened to be watching the video feed while sitting in his office, broke up a drug deal in the hallway.

School leaders also say cameras have been useful when it comes to keeping their buildings free of vandalism and making sure computers and other expensive equipment don't disappear.

"The whole idea of it is for the safety of the children," said Anita Better, director of information technology for the Eastchester school district, which put in about 125 cameras in the past two years and is adding more during the summer. "We also must make sure we're protecting our investment."

But the costs of installing surveillance systems can quickly add up. Cameras typically cost up to \$2,500 each, including installation.

Spotting the potential for growth in the school surveillance market, Mike and Paul Durante added camera installations to their telecommunications company in early 2004.

They have since put up more than 400 cameras in schools throughout Westchester and Rockland counties and are negotiating with about six other schools in the area.

So far, the decision has proved to be fruitful for their Valhalla company, Select Telecom.

"Every time you add a camera, you find five more cameras you want to add," said Paul Durante, the chief operating officer.

Monitoring all these cameras, meanwhile, can become a job in itself. Many administrators have software installed on their office computers so they can easily access the feeds. Other schools assign staff to keep an eye on video monitors throughout the school day.

New Rochelle High School, with more than 3,200 students, uses about 145 cameras. Staff members watch a dozen or so monitors until 10 p.m. every school day.

Cindy Kahn, co-president of the New Rochelle High PTA, said she has never heard a parent complain about the cameras.

She has, however, heard students snicker from time to time.

"I've heard the kids say, 'Oh, gee. You feel like you can't pick your nose.' Or 'If you have a wedgie, it's a problem,' because they know the cameras are there," said Kahn, 56, whose youngest son is a junior. "But OK, that's the only chuckle I've heard."

At Scarsdale High, the cameras attract so little attention that some students didn't even realize they were under surveillance.

Senior Ashna Shah, however, said she knew about the cameras and was glad to have that extra layer of security -even if it meant she was being watched.

"There's nothing private you're doing in a public school hallway," said Shah, 17. "Or at least there shouldn't be."

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