

Official: FBI probing Pa. school webcam spy case

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Harriton High School is shown in Bryn Mawr, Pa., Thursday, Feb. 18, 2010. A family alleges in a federal lawsuit that the suburban Philadelphia school district used school-issued laptop webcams to spy on students at home, potentially catching them and their families in compromising situations. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

(AP) -- The FBI is investigating a Pennsylvania school district accused of secretly activating webcams inside students' homes, a law enforcement official with knowledge of the case told The Associated Press on Friday.

The FBI will explore whether Lower Merion [School](#) District officials broke any federal wiretap or computer-intrusion laws, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Days after a student filed suit over the practice, Lower Merion officials acknowledged Friday that they remotely activated webcams 42 times in the past 14 months, but only to find missing student laptops. They insist they never did so to spy on [students](#), as the student's family claimed in the federal lawsuit.

Families were not informed of the possibility the webcams might be activated in their homes without their permission in the paperwork students sign when they get the computers, district spokesman Doug Young said.

"It's clear what was in place was insufficient, and that's unacceptable," Young said.

The district has suspended the practice amid the lawsuit and the accompanying uproar from students, the community and [privacy advocates](#). District officials hired outside counsel to review the past webcam activations and advise the district on related issues, Young said.

Remote-activation software can be used to capture keystrokes, send commands over the Internet or turn computers into listening devices by turning on built-in microphones. People often use it for legitimate purposes - to access computers from remote locations, for example. But hackers can use it to steal passwords and spouses to track the whereabouts of partners or lovers.

The Pennsylvania case shows how even well-intentioned plans can go awry if officials fail to understand the technology and its potential consequences, privacy experts said. Compromising images from inside a student's bedroom could fall into the hands of rogue school staff or otherwise be spread across the Internet, they said.

"What about the (potential) abuse of power from higher ups, trying to

find out more information about the head of the PTA?" wondered Ari Schwartz, vice president at the Center for Democracy and Technology. "If you don't think about the privacy and security consequences of using this kind of technology, you run into problems."

The FBI opened its investigation after news of the suit broke on Thursday, the law-enforcement official said. Montgomery County District Attorney Risa Vetri Ferman may also investigate, she said Friday.

Lower Merion, an affluent district in Philadelphia's suburbs, issues Apple laptops to all 2,300 students at its two high schools. Only two employees in the technology department were authorized to activate the cameras - and only to locate missing laptops, Young said. The remote activations captured images but never recorded sound, he said.

No one had complained before Harriton High School student Blake Robbins and his parents, Michael and Holly Robbins, filed their lawsuit Tuesday, he said.

According to the suit, Harriton vice principal Lindy Matsko told Blake on Nov. 11 that the school thought he was "engaged in improper behavior in his home." She allegedly cited as evidence a photograph "embedded" in his school-issued laptop.

The suit does not say if his laptop had been reported stolen, and Young said the litigation prevents him from disclosing that fact. He said the district never violated its policy of only using the remote-activation software to find missing laptops. "Infer what you want," Young said.

Neither the family nor their lawyer, Mark Haltzman, returned calls for comments this week. The suit accuses the school of turning on Blake's webcam while the computer was inside his Penn Valley home, allegedly

violating wiretap laws and his right to privacy.

The remote activations helped the district locate 28 of the 42 missing computers, Young said. He could not immediately say whether the technology staff was authorized to share the images with Matsko or other officials.

Either way, the potential for abuse is nearly limitless, especially since many teens keep their computers in their bedrooms, experts said.

"This is an age where kids explore their sexuality, so there's a lot of that going on in the room," said Witold Walczak, legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union of [Pennsylvania](#), which is not involved in the Robbins case. "This is fodder for child porn."

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