

Pa. school official defended in webcam spy case

February 22 2010, By RON TODT , Associated Press Writer



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) -- A suburban Philadelphia school district accused of secretly switching on laptop computer webcams inside students' homes says it never used webcam images to monitor or discipline students and believes one of its administrators has been "unfairly portrayed and unjustly attacked."

The Lower Merion [School](#) District, in response to a suit filed by a student, has acknowledged that webcams were remotely activated 42 times in the past 14 months, but only to find missing, lost or stolen

laptops - which the district noted would include "a loaner computer that, against regulations, might be taken off campus."

"Despite some reports to the contrary, be assured that the security-tracking software has been completely disabled," Superintendent Christopher W. McGinley said in a statement on the district's [Web site](#) late Friday. Officials vowed a comprehensive review that McGinley said should result in stronger [privacy](#) policies.

Harriton High School student Blake Robbins and his parents, Michael and Holly Robbins, filed a federal civil rights lawsuit Tuesday against the district, its board of directors and McGinley. They accused the school of turning on the webcam in his computer while it was inside their Penn Valley home, which they allege violated wiretap laws and his right to privacy.

The suit, which seeks class-action status, alleges that Harriton vice principal Lindy Matsko on Nov. 11 cited a laptop photo in telling Blake that the school thought he was engaging in improper behavior. He and his family have told reporters that an official mistook a piece of candy for a pill and thought he was selling drugs.

Neither the family nor their attorney, Mark Haltzman, returned calls this week seeking comment. A listed number for Matsko could not be found.

"We believe that the administrator at Harriton has been unfairly portrayed and unjustly attacked in connection with her attempts to be supportive of a student and his family," the statement on the Lower Merion School District site said. "The district never did and never would use such tactics as a basis for disciplinary action."

A district spokesman declined further comment on the statement Saturday.

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, not administrators, were authorized to activate the cameras, which captured still images but not sound, officials said.

"While certain rules for laptop use were spelled out ... there was no explicit notification that the laptop contained the security software," McGinley said. "This notice should have been given, and we regret that was not done."

The district's Web site said 42 activations of the system resulted in the recovery of 18 computers, not 28 as district spokesman Doug Young had said earlier. They reiterated that it was done only to locate lost, stolen or missing laptops.

"The district has not used the tracking feature or webcam for any other purpose or in any other manner whatsoever," the Web site said. The site also noted that there was nothing to prevent students from covering the webcam with tape.

McGinley said the district had hired former federal prosecutor Henry Hockeimer Jr. to review past practices and suggest improvements.

The FBI is looking into whether any federal wiretap or computer-intrusion laws were violated, according to an official who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to discuss the investigation. Montgomery County District Attorney Risa Vetri Ferman has said she might also investigate.

Andy Derrow, father of a Harriton junior, said he does not believe the district was spying on students. He said he has two other sons who graduated from the school and had substantially benefited from the

computer program.

"I don't think there was any ill intent here," he said "I think we all need to take a breath and wait and see what the facts are."

More information: Lower Merion School Distract:
<http://www.lmsd.org/>

©2010 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: Pa. school official defended in webcam spy case (2010, February 22) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-02-pa-school-defended-webcam-spy.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.