

Pa. school: Webcams used only on missing laptops

February 19 2010, By MARYCLAIRE DALE , 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 spying on students at home via school-issued computers told parents it only activated the webcams to find missing laptops.

The schools' technology and security departments would activate the webcam when any of the 2,300 student laptops were reported lost or stolen, Lower Merion [School](#) District Superintendent Christopher McGinley said. He posted the letter to parents on the district Web site late Thursday, amid widespread student outrage and the filing of a

potential class-action lawsuit alleging wiretap and privacy violations.

"The security feature's capabilities were limited to taking a still image of the operator and the operator's screen. This feature was only used for the narrow purpose of locating a lost, stolen or missing [laptop](#)," McGinley wrote. "The District never activated the security feature for any other purpose or in any other manner whatsoever."

Student Blake Robbins and his parents filed the electronic-privacy suit came after an assistant principal at Harriton High School told him the camera had caught him doing something inappropriate at home. Michael Robbins, his father, confirmed with the educator that the school could activate the webcams remotely, the lawsuit said.

The affluent suburban district issues laptops to all students at its two high schools, Harriton and Lower Merion High School.

The suit did not indicate that Blake Robbins's laptop had ever been reported lost or stolen. Neither the district nor family lawyer Mark Haltzman immediately returned phone messages Friday morning, and the family has declined to comment on the suit, which was filed Tuesday in federal court in Philadelphia.

Experts in electronic privacy law believe the district's actions could amount to illegal wiretapping.

"I think they had to get consent to take photos," said University of San Francisco law professor Susan Friewald, who writes on the issue.

"It seems like a great idea to have the school issue a laptop," she said. "(But) if the school districts are going to use them to spy on students, we should certainly be concerned."

The security feature allows district personnel to remotely activate the webcam and take a picture of the user and the computer screen. That information can then be used to track down a laptop that has been reported stolen or missing.

Lower Merion spokesman Doug Young confirmed Friday that the district believes the webcams were only used in isolated instances of reported theft or loss. Nonetheless, a review is underway of both the activations and the policy.

"We're proud of taking the lead with this initiative, and giving laptops to [students](#), but anytime you're talking about technology and education and kids, there's an important conversation to be had about privacy and balance," Young told The Associated Press on Friday.

"We've taken pause over the last day and gone back and begun to review everything that's related to our policies and procedures," he said.

He could not discuss details of the Robbins lawsuit. However, he said district officials do not believe anyone violated the activation policy.

"We intend to vigorously defend ourselves and we intend to prevail (in the suit)," Young said.

More information: Suit: Pa. school used webcams to spy on students (Update): www.physorg.com/news185724297.html

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