

SENATE EDUCATION

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Parents Protest Student Computer ID Tags Associated Press

SUTTER, Calif. - The only grade school in this rural town is requiring students to wear radio frequency identification badges that can track their every move. Some parents are outraged, fearing it will take away their children's privacy.

The badges introduced at Brittan Elementary School on Jan. 18 rely on the same radio frequency and scanner technology that companies use to track livestock and product inventory. Similar devices have recently been used to monitor youngsters in some parts of Japan.

But few American school districts have embraced such a monitoring system, and civil libertarians hope to keep it that way.

"If this school doesn't stand up, then other schools might adopt it," Nicole Ozer, a representative of the American Civil Liberties Union, warned school board members at a meeting Tuesday night. "You might be a small community, but you are one of the first communities to use this technology."

The system was imposed, without parental input, by the school as a way to simplify attendance-taking and potentially reduce vandalism and improve student safety. Principal Earnie Graham hopes to eventually add bar codes to the existing ID's so that students can use them to pay for cafeteria meals and check out library books.

But some parents see a system that can monitor their children's movements on campus as something straight out of Orwell.

"There is a way to make kids safer without making them feel like a piece of inventory," said Michael Cantrall, one of several angry parents who complained. "Are we trying to bring them up with respect and trust, or tell them that you can't trust anyone, you are always going to be monitored, and someone is always going to be watching you?"

Cantrall said he told his children, in the 5th and 7th grades, not to wear the badges. He also filed a protest letter with the board and alerted the ACLU.

Graham, who also serves as the superintendent of the single-school district, told the parents that their children could be disciplined for boycotting the badges — and that he doesn't understand what all their angst is about.

"Sometimes when you are on the cutting edge, you get caught," Graham said, recounting the angry phone calls and notes he has received from parents.

Each student is required to wear identification cards around their necks with their picture, name and grade and a wireless transmitter that beams their ID number to a teacher's handheld computer when the child passes under an antenna posted above a classroom door.

Graham also asked to have a chip reader installed in locker room bathrooms to reduce vandalism, although that reader is not functional yet. And while he has ordered everyone on campus to wear the badges, he said only the 7th and 8th grade classrooms are being monitored thus far.

In addition to the privacy concerns, parents are worried that the information on and inside the badges could wind up in the wrong hands and endanger their children, and that radio frequency technology might carry health risks.

Graham dismisses each objection, arguing that the devices do not emit any cancer-causing radioactivity, and that for now, they merely confirm that each child is in his or her classroom, rather than track them around the school like a global-positioning device. The 15-digit ID number that confirms attendance is encrypted, he said, and not linked to other personal information such as an address or telephone number.

What's more, he says that it is within his power to set rules that promote a positive school environment: If he thinks ID badges will improve things, he says, then badges there will be.

"You know what it comes down to? I believe junior high students want to be stylish. This is not stylish," he said.

This latest adaptation of radio frequency ID technology was developed by InCom Corp., a local company co-founded by the parent of a former Brittan student, and some parents are suspicious about the financial relationship between the school and the company. InCom plans to promote it at a national convention of school administrators next month.

InCom has paid the school several thousand dollars for agreeing to the experiment, and has promised a royalty from each sale if the system takes off, said the company's co-founder, Michael Dobson, who works as a technology specialist in the town's high school. Brittan's technology aide also works part-time for InCom.

Not everyone in this close-knit farming town northwest of Sacramento is against the system. Some said they welcomed the IDs as a security measure.

"This is not Mayberry. This is Sutter, California. Bad things can happen here," said Tim Crabtree, an area parent.



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