Should schools use RFID chips to track students?

Kasey Panetta, Associate Editor

A few weeks ago, I came across an article on Slate [1]talking about a school in Texas that had put RFID tags in the student ID cards that everyone has to wear. The article—available at the link--was a discussion on whether the tags were an invasion of privacy.

It's an interesting—though not entirely new—question.

Should school-aged children have the same right to privacy that an adult might have? When it comes to locker searches, the answer is a resounding no. It's been made pretty clear over the past couple years that when you're on school property, you surrender some of the freedoms you might otherwise have (i.e., random drug testing or dress codes).

According to the two San Antonio schools, the creepily named "Student Locator Project [2]", the point of the project is three-fold. In addition to the obvious benefits of a smart card like simplifying voting for school dances, providing access to the cafeteria and library, serving as ID, and allowing students to purchase tickets to school events, the cards were designed to increase student safety and increase attendance. The school claims that being able to locate students who are not in their seats during roll call, but are actually on campus somewhere, will allow administrators to first figure out where kids *are* before sending them back to class. They also claim that increased attendance equals increased state revenues since a lot of revenue is apparently calculated by daily attendance.

Just for the sake of information, the RFID tags don't contain any personal information about the students. They contain a serial number—different from the student's ID number—that corresponds to the student's name in an encrypted list.

Most of this took place over the summer, so fast forward to the beginning of the school year and there was a bit of a kerfuffle about the tags.

Critics from the creatively named Chip Free Schools argue that it's a massive invasion of privacy. First, they are concerned about what they call "dehumanizing

uses," citing that administrators could track how long a student is in the bathroom. Secondly, arguably more powerful, is that students will be scared to use school counseling or therapy services if they know they're being tracked. Lastly, they find "tracking and monitoring them in their development may condition them to accept constant monitoring and tracking of their whereabouts and behaviors. This could usher in a society that accepts this kind of treatment as routine rather than an encroachment of privacy and civil liberties."

I know I'll probably be in the minority on this one, but of all of these, I only find the second reason compelling. Kids are often embarrassed enough that they are in a position to seek help from a therapist or counselor, without having to worry that they're going to be monitored. This seems like a pretty easy problem to solve. Kids entering the office could leave their tags with the teacher or in a designated place.

That being said, the first two concerns seem dependent on how trustworthy the monitors are and if it's a 24/7 monitoring or if it's recorded. Probably the person in charge of this shouldn't be someone interested in how long a student is in the bathroom. In fact, that person should probably not be in the school at all. Also, according to the administration, the chips don't track students when they're in the bathroom.

The third reason is purely philosophical. Personally, if I was really fired up about being tagged like a deer, it's not something that I would suddenly become complacent toward as I got older. This might even serve to turn some kids into activists and alert them that they need to be aware of what's going on around them. [I still have a problem with random drug testing that stems from a high school policy.] On the other hand if, like most teenagers, these kids are absorbed in normal high school stuff, they're not going to care about this, anyway. Also, considering most schools have security cameras, it's pretty hard to make this protest stick.

In a bonus story, one dad complained that the chips were "the mark of the beast" and objected on biblical grounds. His daughter refused to wear the ID card even when administrators offered to remove the chip. That's almost a different issue, but it's interesting to see on what grounds people are complaining.

The positives are that schools know where students are—barring a situation in which the ID card is removed. This could be a really great tool during an emergency situation or even to make sure chronic class skippers have their keister in a seat. As a parent, you expect the school to know where your kid is *at all times*. The chip, which only works on school grounds, is making it easier to locate your child.

Source URL (retrieved on *07/23/2014 - 11:19am*):
http://www.ecnmag.com/articles/2012/12/should-schools-use-rfid-chips-track-students?qt-video_of_the_day=0&qt-recent_content=0&qt-most_popular=0

Links:
[1] http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2012/10/11/rfid_tracking_texas_schools_force_kids_to_wear_electronic_chips.html
[2] http://www.nisd.net/studentlocator/