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Student-tracking system at Texas schools prompts privacy concerns

By Joshua Rhett Miller

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A Texas school district's plan to track students with microchips implanted in mandatory IDs has at least one parent charging it's an invasion of his daughter's privacy.

Beginning in the middle of October, roughly 4,200 students at John Jay High School and Anson Jones Middle School in San Antonio will be required to wear the ID cards that utilize radio frequency identification. The card, which will be worn on a lanyard around each student’s neck, will transmit location information via microchip to electronic readers throughout the campuses, Northside Independent School District spokesman Pascual Gonzalez told FoxNews.com.

“It is like GPS in the school,” Gonzalez said. “As administrators, we are charged with the safety of students in our schools. So within the four walls of Jay High School and Jones Middle School during the school day, we will always know where those kids are.”

The one-year pilot program, which will cost the district $261,000, is also expected to increase attendance, and could bring an additional $2 million to the district in state funding as a result, said Gonzalez, adding that the program will be reevaluated next summer.

“This allows us to quickly identify if any of those students reported absent are, in fact, in the school,” Gonzalez said in reference to students who may be elsewhere in the building during roll call. “And if they are, we find them, get them to class and report them present.”

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Parents have been “supportive” of the new program, Gonzalez said, with the exception of one parent, Steven Hernandez, and his daughter Andrea, both of whom participated in a protest against the technology.

“He is the lone protester,” Gonzalez said. “For us, this technology represents an efficient way to locate a student and to always know where our students are in our care.”

Attempts to reach Andrea Hernandez on Wednesday were unsuccessful, but the John Jay sophomore told KSN.com she thinks many students will rebel against the new policy by stashing the ID cards in their lockers.

“It makes me uncomfortable,” she told the website. “It’s an invasion of my privacy.”

Hernandez believes the system isn’t necessary because the district already employs digital cameras in all high schools and middle schools. She’s also worried what might happen if the technology gets hacked or misused.

"With a smart phone you can use the option to use your locator, but this I can't turn it off," Hernandez said. Other parents, meanwhile, have indicated they support the new program.

"You never know when a disaster is going to happen and to know where your child is at least you have that card to know where your kid's at all times," Michelle Esquivel told FOX 29.

Another parent, Ernest Castro, said the safety of his child is the utmost importance. "I'm always worried about my daughter being at school," he told FOX 29.

In a **letter** to parents, John Jay High School administrators assured them that the ID cards will store no personal information and that they’ll work only on school grounds.

“Think how important this will be in the case of an emergency,” the letter reads. “In addition, the ‘smart’ student ID card will be used in the breakfast and lunch lines in the cafeteria and to check out books from the library. Because all students will be required to wear their ‘smart’ ID, staff will be able to quickly identify Jay students inside the school.”

Despite those assurances, a coalition of privacy and civil liberties organizations and experts have called for a moratorium on the technology, including the American Civil Liberties Union and Liz McIntyre, author of "Spy Chips: How Major Corporations and Government Plan to Track your Every Purchase and Watch Your Every Move."

"These tags are always on," McIntyre told FoxNews.com. "There's no off switch on these things."

McIntyre, who began studying the technology in 2002, said she's primarily concerned with the electronic readers getting into the wrong hands or for students to attempt to use them fraudulently, perhaps by leaving them at school while being elsewhere.

"We're concerned that students could leave the tags in school and then leave," she said.

In a statement released last month, Dr. Katherine Albrecht, director of Consumers Against Supermarket Privacy Invasion and Numbering, warned against an impending backlash against the technology, which is currently in use only in two public school districts in Texas.

“Schools, of all places, should be teaching children how to participate in a free democratic society, not conditioning them to be tracked like cattle," Albrecht's statement read. "Districts planning to use RFID should brace themselves for a parent backlash, protests and lawsuits.”

Gonzalez rejected that criticism, saying the pilot program and the “smart” ID cards have been used successfully in Houston’s Spring

Independent School District for at least the past five years.

“This is non-threatening technology,” he said. “This is not surveillance.”

1. Based on the article, make a list of pros and cons regarding student tracking in schools.
2. Do you think there should be some way to track students while they are on campus? Why or why not?
3. How would you address the privacy concerns listed above and still have a system that worked in knowing where students are?
4. What are your conclusions on this issue?