

RFID Tracking of Preschool Students Rears its Head Again in California Schools

September 13, 2010 - In 2005 we told you about a school in Sutter, CA that installed an RFID (radio frequency identification) tracking system to track every move that students made during their school day. The system was so unpopular that Brittany Elementary School was forced to remove it once parents started picketing the school and protesting at school board meetings. But none of that seems to have had an impact on California's Contra Cost County School District. That district is now planning on tracking every move that preschool children make once they get to school using the very same technology. Given the kind of data that the schools will be collecting, the privacy implications are unsettling.

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s.type = 'text/javascript';  
s.src = 'http://widgets.digg.com/buttons.js';  
s1.parentNode.insertBefore(s, s1);  
})();
```

The privacy issues from five years ago have not changed. Parents were concerned about the type of data being collected on their children, how long the data would be stored, and what it would be used for. In the case of Contra Cost County, the school board has already said that they intend to use the technology to do more than monitor attendance. For instance, they will be able to track the whereabouts of students at any given time, and they will also be using the system to determine which children have already eaten.

Just those two issues - where children are located and whether they have eaten - could create real privacy concerns. RFID technology is such that every time children go through the line at the school cafeteria, the school will now be able to compile a complete record of what that child has eaten all year long. How will that data be used? If children are overweight, will parents be getting phone calls from the school telling them that their child is eating all the wrong foods? Or if a child is underweight by the school's standards, will someone come along and try to say that he or she has an eating disorder and needs treatment even though the parents and the child's own physicians may disagree?

Because the school is tracking the movement of children, will children that are always on the go be accused of being hyperactive?

All of these are issues that could impact children for their entire life. For instance, would that child that was thought to have an eating disorder be insurable if the data was shared with an insurance company?

Unfortunately, there is no way to know how this data will be used or by whom. Although California still has the strictest privacy laws in the country, there are no laws concerning the tracking of school children and the specific data that can be collected or limits on its use. The school has already installed this system and it is already in use. Parents need to address this system in the same way that the parents in Sutter, CA did five years ago. Outside of attendance and making sure that children are actually learning, schools have absolutely no business collecting personal data on children.

byJim Malmberg

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