



September 28, 2008

Cameras might watch Rochester students

Considering surveillance at schools

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Police concerns about crime in Rochester Community Schools have prompted the district's Board of Education to consider a proposal to install surveillance cameras in the hallways, entrances and parking lots of its high schools and middle schools.

Thefts, vandalism, bomb threats and drug and alcohol use have been problems in the district, according to officials with the Oakland County Sheriff's Office. Authorities would not provide statistics, however.

The board is to consider the issue in November, but trustees say concerns over the district's \$6-million deficit could stall approval of the \$1.4-million proposed project.

School districts such as Wayne-Westland, Warren Consolidated, Ferndale, Ann Arbor and Taylor use cameras inside and outside of schools in buses or parking lots.

Students in Rochester say the problems aren't as severe as police claim. And critics of video surveillance in schools say there's little evidence that the cameras prevent crime. But proponents say cameras deter bad behavior, help keep students safe during emergencies, and help solve crimes like bomb threats. Police say those threats are often scribbled on bathroom walls.

"We can put cameras in the hallways to see who is going in and out of the bathrooms," said Lt. Ray White of the Oakland County Sheriff's Office.

The cameras also would help identify intruders in the schools and spot fights when they break out, police said.

But Caitlyn Brennan, 17, the senior class president at Rochester High, said the school's problems, including drug use, aren't unique. She isn't against surveillance cameras, but said they're unlikely to deter crime in school or away from it.

"Security cameras are not going to stop a kid from snorting up coke when he's at home," Brennan said, adding that the idea of cameras all over her school "does feel a little Big Brotherish."

Skip Lare, director of student affairs for Warren Consolidated, said the cameras serve more like extra eyes on the hallways rather than deterrents. Based on video evidence, three students have been expelled since the cameras were installed more than two years ago, he said.

"I don't think it prevents anything," Lare said, "because the kids forget that they're there."

But the Ann Arbor district has reported seeing decreases in thefts at Huron High since installing cameras two years ago.

Liz Margolis, a spokeswoman for Ann Arbor Public Schools, said she couldn't release statistics on the thefts because the school board hasn't yet reviewed the data.

Also, she said, crime has decreased at Pioneer High School, where cameras were installed at the end of the last school year.

The American Civil Liberties Union and the student council at Pioneer High criticized the district last year, saying the cameras violated the students' rights.

"We shouldn't have a prison-like environment in public schools," said Mary Bejian, deputy director of the ACLU's Michigan chapter.

But surveillance has become normal as security cameras can be found in malls, fast-food restaurants and recreation centers, said Ken Trump, president of the Cleveland-based consulting firm National School Safety and Security Services.

"We're dealing with a generation where the presence of security ... is a part of their daily life," Trump said. Schools "are one of the last places that have jumped on the security bandwagon."

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