



School Spies on Students at Home With Webcams: Suit

Administrator remotely activates student's webcam to watch his “improper behavior” at home: lawsuit

By Teresa Masterson

A Philadelphia-area school official confronted a student with photographic evidence that he was doing bad things at home. She got her evidence by activating the webcam on the laptop in his house, a lawsuit claims.

Lower Merion School District officials are spying on students and their families inside their homes with Web cameras installed in pupil laptops, claims Blake J. Robbins in a lawsuit against the district.

The lawsuit, filed Feb. 11, alleges that webcams in personal laptops -- that are issued to every high school student -- can be, and have been, remotely activated by school administrators without a person in the same room as the laptop being the wiser.

How did Robbins and his family find out administrators could spy on them?

On Nov. 11, Harriton High School Assistant Principal Lindy Matsko told the teen that he “was engaged in improper behavior in his home,” and showed Robbins photographic evidence from his webcam, according to the suit.

Upon hearing about the incident, Robbins' father, Michael Robbins, got confirmation from Matsko that the school district does in fact have the ability to remotely activate any of the students' webcams at any time -- even if the computer is not being used.

“Occasionally a green light would go on on your computer which would kind of give you the feeling that somebody's watching you,” Harriton High School student Drew Scheier told NBC Philadelphia.

Superintendent Christopher McGinley boasts of the laptop program on the district's site, saying that it “ensures that all students have 24/7 access to school-based resources.” But administrators never told students or their families that district officials had “24/7 access” into their homes at the same time, according to the lawsuit.

The Lower Merion School District posted this statement on their website late Thursday afternoon:

Last year, our district became one of the first school systems in the United States to provide laptop computers to all high school students. This initiative has been well received and has provided educational benefits to our students.

The District is dedicated to protecting and promoting student privacy. The laptops do contain a security feature intended to track lost, stolen and missing laptops. This feature has been deactivated effective today.

We regret if this situation has caused any concern or inconvenience among our students and families. The allegations are counter to everything that we stand for as a school and a community. We are reviewing the matter and will provide an additional update as soon as information becomes available.

The class action suit, which represents not only Robbins and his family, but all 1,800 students given one of these “spying” laptops, is based on the claim that the district is violating the Constitution’s Fourth Amendment right to privacy and the Civil Rights Act, among others.

“It freaks me out because what if I’m home and I’m just changing to go to sleep and my computer’s open,” Lower Merion student Julie Reiff said to NBC Philadelphia. “Are they going to take a picture of it and say I’m doing something illegal?”

“It’s a little weird to know they can see what I’m doing,” she said.

NBC Philadelphia spoke briefly to Blake Robbin's mother who says the family was advised not to talk by their attorney. Messages left for that attorney weren't immediately returned.

Published at 12:55 PM EST on Feb 18, 2010 | Updated at 6:14 PM EST on Feb 18, 2010

Reading Questions:

1. In the article, who is suing whom and why?

2. Did the school have the right to remotely access the students' laptops? Why or why not?

3. Why do you think the administration did it? Was their reasoning justified?

4. When a person does something wrong, do they still deserve privacy?

5. Should students be able to trust their school? Do you trust Mayfield High School?
