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What Lessons Are We Teaching?

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Recently the New Jersey Institute of Technology's Homeland Security Technology Systems Center proposed "smart" cameras that would identify everyone entering school premises and send out an alert when an intruder is discovered. That follows on a similar action by a middle school in Phoenix Arizona, which in 2003 installed at its doors video cameras and face-scanning technology that linked to national databases of sex offenders and missing children. These are ambitious versions of proposals being discussed in many places. In a post-September 11th, post-Beslan world, closed-circuit television (CCTV) is the newest idea for public schools. CCTV in schools is not universally embraced, however. For example in Israel, where public-safety issues are paramount and security guards stand in front of discos, shopping malls, and restaurants, video cameras are not in routine use in schools.

What dangers these cameras would protect against? The model proposed by the New Jersey Institute of Technology would not have prevented Columbine; the two students had every right to be on campus. Nor would video cameras have prevented Beslan, because the weapons that enabled the takeover were hidden while the Russian school was under construction. But on the other hand, such cameras probably would catch kids involved in inappropriate activities — smoking, hanging out instead of being in class — why not invest?

For one thing, with a false positive rate of 1% — ten false alarms every morning in a school with just a thousand students, teachers, and staff — it is doubtful that facial-recognition systems would work. How long would videotapes be stored? Who would have access to them? What risks would this introduce? Can we really expect schools to adequately secure online files of student and staff records, records that, by necessity, must be Internet accessible?

Video camera in schools introduce a different set of issues as well. Consider, for a moment, the role of public schools in society. "[T]he individual who is to be educated is a social individual and . . . society is an organic union of individuals," wrote John Dewey in 1897 in "My Pedagogic Creed" (*The School Journal.*, Vol. LIV, No. 3, pp. 77-80). According to Dewey, whose theories of progressive education profoundly impacted public schools, "The

only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated to act as a member of a unity . . . and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs." The unspoken, but vital, role of public school is in creating a cohesive society. In a nation as diverse as the U.S. is, and that many others, including France, the U.K., and Holland are becoming, such socialization is critically important.

Seen from that perspective, the lessons from CCTV in schools are quite disturbing. Video cameras in schools teach children that in a public space, eyes you can't see may be watching you. Video cameras in schools demonstrate to students that you don't have any privacy (get over it). Video cameras in schools show disrespect for freedom of speech and freedom of association¹. And video cameras in hallways are one small step from video cameras in classrooms; what better way to stifle teachers' creativity and experimentation?

Benjamin Spock, Penelope Leach, T. Berry Brazelton, and other experts in child behavior tell us that children learn not from the lessons we deliberately set out to teach, but by osmosis. Children learn not from what we say, but from what we do. In the end, that makes the choice about CCTV in schools quite simple. After all, when we teach *1984*, what is the lesson we are hoping to convey to the students — the one that comes from a critical reading of the text, or the one that comes from surveillance cameras monitoring students' and teachers' every move?

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¹Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or the right of the people to peacefully assemble . . . First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.