



"ID, Please" – School Security In The 21st Century

Insights

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Having just observed the eighth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, it's worth considering how much we have become accustomed to enhanced security measures in our day-to-day lives. Anyone who has traveled through a U.S. airport, shown up for jury duty at the local courthouse, or even attended a ball game over the past few years, knows that things aren't what they used to be. We've all become used to increased security, and we're usually willing to go along with the inconveniences and invasions of privacy, especially if it's clear the enhanced measures actually decrease the chances of an incident.

But not everyone is comfortable making the trade-off. Parents of two students at an elementary school in Texas' Lake Travis Independent School District (LTISD) objected to the school's rule requiring visitors to produce a Texas driver's license or other state-issued identification card to access certain areas of the school. The dispute escalated into a federal case, decided last month by U. S. District Judge Sam Sparks of Austin. While much of the decision applies only to public schools, it also contains guidance for any school, public or private, that tries to balance the privacy interests of parents and students with the need to protect children and maintain a secure school environment. *Yvonne Meadows v. Janie Braxdale and Lake Travis ISD.*

Concerns About Intruder Led To Action

Following an incident in the 2004-05 school year in which an unidentified man gained access to an elementary school and exposed himself to a fifth grader, LTISD retained the services of Houston-based Raptor Technologies, Inc. to develop a security system that would require visitors – including parents – to provide proof of identification and compare the names with sex-offender databases. The Raptor system scanned the front of Texas drivers' licenses and utilized the visitors' names and dates of birth to run the sex-offender check. The scanned license image was also used to print out temporary "visitor badges" to be worn while on school premises. Without going through the Raptor screening process and wearing the badge, parents could access only certain areas of the school campus without a formal escort.

Yvonne Meadows refused to produce her driver's license when she arrived at Bee Cave Elementary School in September, 2006 to attend parent-teacher conferences. She objected in particular to the system's scanning of the card information and the sex-offender database review. Meadows also refused to comply with the policy

information and the sex offender database remain. Meadows also refused to comply with the policy on several other visits to the school. She pursued grievances about the rule and later filed a lawsuit in state court seeking to have the policy overturned. Since the lawsuit accused the school district of violating the U.S. Constitution, among other claims, LTISD removed the case to federal court in Austin.

In a 26-page decision, Judge Sparks ruled that the school district's use of the Raptor program was constitutional and did not violate the state and federal laws cited by Meadows. In so ruling, Judge Sparks noted that "schools have not only an interest but a duty to take appropriate steps to protect our children while they are at school." Moreover, he wrote that it was not for the courts or parents to decide what those steps should be, and that the Court's sole role in the dispute was to determine whether LTISD's security policies violated the law.

Ideas To Consider

Schools considering enhanced safety measures would do well to review Judge Sparks' decision. The Raptor system favored by LTISD is not the only step a school can take to enhance the safety and security of the school premises. In addition, schools can consider:

- requiring parents and other volunteers to undergo training on issues relating to the sexual and physical abuse of children before being allowed to participate in school activities;
- adding security personnel for special events, including such things as plays, sporting events, and cheerleader competitions;
- completing criminal background checks on parents and guardians before allowing them to participate as chaperones at school events which might find them alone with children other than their own;
- enhancing the security of the school physical plant through physical barriers, preventing unauthorized personnel from accessing the campus while students are present; and
- installing video surveillance equipment.

While schools clearly have a great deal of leeway in implementing these kinds of security measures, it is important that schools develop a security policy with input from faculty, staff and parents and then communicate the substance of the policy to the school community. By managing the expectations of parents and other visitors regarding privacy issues, schools can avoid misunderstandings – and maybe even lawsuits.

Related People





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