



America gets schooled on spying

By: Nat Hentoff - January 31, 2013

Having reported on small but growing numbers of public school students who are eagerly learning to be actively knowledgeable citizens, I must now turn to a much larger, growing problem within public education. As we adults are continually losing our privacy rights to insatiable government technology, so, too, are students.

John Whitehead is the one news analyst persistently researching and reporting on how members of this generation (and, most likely, subsequent generations) are being relentlessly tracked throughout their school years. Whitehead, a practicing constitutional attorney, is founder and president of the Rutherford Institute in Charlottesville, Va.

Recently, he wrote about the Northside Independent School District in San Antonio, where about 4,200 students at Jay High School and Jones Middle School are compelled “to carry ‘smart’ identification cards embedded with Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tracking devices” (The Fight Against the Total Surveillance State in Our Schools,” rutherford.org, Dec. 3).

This, in the land of the free and home of the brave?

“These tags,” Whitehead said, “produce a radio signal that is tied to the students’ Social Security numbers, allowing the wearer’s precise movements to be constantly monitored.”

Already, 290 surveillance cameras are in these schools. But these ID cards, “which the students are required to wear, will make it possible for school officials to track students’ whereabouts at all times.”

Dig this, Moms and Dads: “Teachers are even requiring students to wear the IDs when they want to use the bathroom.”

As for those who choose not to follow the rules? Whitehead writes: “Those who ... refuse to wear the SmartID badge will also be forced to stand in separate lunch lines (and) denied participation in student government and activities ...”

Have schools in Iran, China and Zimbabwe become this advanced in their service to the all-knowing state?

Like Paul Revere, who kept alerting us to raids on our liberties as we were moving to become an allegedly self-governing republic, Whitehead keeps ringing this country’s warning bell. He continues: “Some cities already have fully implemented programs, including Houston, which began using RFID chips to track students as early as 2004. Preschoolers” — yes, tots! — “in Richmond, Calif., have been tagged with RFID chips since 2010.”

What's next, chips in the womb?

There have been a few rebellions by some parents and students that have done to RFID programs what Patrick Henry and James Madison would have immediately accomplished, but the pressure on students to remain aware that they're always being spied on keeps mounting.

Whitehead writes, "These tracking devices are not being employed to prevent students from cutting classes or foster better academics. It's a money game. Using the devices to account for the students' whereabouts on campus, whether in class or not, school administrators can 'count' students as being 'in school' and thereby qualify for up to \$1.7 million from the state government."

As for nongovernmental pressures, Whitehead reminds us of "the financial interest of the security industrial complex, which has set its sights on the schools as 'a vast, rich market' — a \$20 billion market, no less — just waiting to be conquered. Indeed, corporations stand to make a great deal of money if RFID tracking becomes the norm across the country.

I think of my grandchildren, who are lively, independent thinkers, as Whitehead focuses on how the kids of Northside Independent School District, and others, will one day live: "Due in large part to the technological and profit-driven collusion between government and big business, every aspect of our society, from schooling, to banking, to shopping, to health care is becoming increasingly automated and surveillance oriented ..."

During the inevitably extensive presidential debates in 2016, will any candidate from either party demand the re-education of public school authorities who allow and enforce the teaching of students to be suspects?

Years ago, as we became aware the FBI was listening in on our phone conversations, I often heard the response, "I have nothing to hide. I don't care."

I don't hear that much any more. But the FBI still cares. What's the citizenry going to do about all of these invasions of privacy, including the privacy of our schoolchildren?