Quiet installation of cameras in Newton schools sparks debate
Right to privacy, security collide

By Rachana Rathi
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In the City of Newton, where civil liberties and liberal politics run deep, disclosure that two local schools installed security cameras without informing faculty, the School Committee, or the school community has touched off a debate pitting the right to privacy against protecting valuables in the schools.

Superintendent Jeffrey Young said he is "confident that any future determinations around security will be handled in a more open and public way."

Surveillance scrutinized

In an open letter made public last week, Superintendent Jeffrey M. Young disclosed that security cameras had been installed at Newton North High School without the public's knowledge. Last month, a student newspaper reported that security cameras had been found at the city's other high school, Newton South.

Now the School Committee is expected to deliberate on whether the cameras should be used at all, with some committee members saying that while they are open to hearing the arguments for the use of cameras, their first instinct is to say no.

"I think there are privacy rights that outweigh any short-term advantages it
seems cameras might have," the committee's chairwoman, Dori Zaleznik, said yesterday. "Students should be assured of privacy just like anybody else. And putting school personnel into this pseudo-police role also crosses some boundaries."

Young said in his letter that Newton South's principal, Brian Salzer, had installed five cameras in hallways outside a locker room and bathroom in August after discussing the matter with Newton North's principal, Jennifer Price. Price informed Salzer that three years ago her high school's former principal, working with Newton police, installed four security cameras near a technology closet where more than $30,000 worth of laptops and other equipment had been stolen, Young said.

A thief was caught, and the cameras were turned off.

Salzer, also working with Newton police, was attempting to deal with a number of thefts from a locker room area and vandalism in a bathroom near the school's auditorium, Young said in an interview.

The Newton South camera system was never used because the school encountered a software problem.

"I personally have concerns about the use of any kind of surveillance equipment," said the School Committee's vice chairman, Marc Laredo. "We have some significant policy decisions to make: balancing the perceived needs of preventing theft, destruction of property, perhaps ensuring personal safety, while respecting people's right to privacy and concerns about overly intrusive governmental oversight."

Committee member Susan Heyman said that she has a "basic antipathy for surveillance," but that she also could see the need if the cameras helped protect the students. But she said she is less inclined to use them to protect valuables.

"As long as we have had high schools, kids have probably had things pilfered, and there's been vandalism in bathrooms," said Heyman. "Just because we now have the technology, doesn't mean we have to use it."

"I would have to be convinced that it was so pervasive, so serious, and so detrimental to the morale of the school that we need to do this," she said.

Heyman said she would want to explore other alternatives before going to security cameras. For instance, she questioned why there are no secure places in locker rooms for students to place their valuables.

Parents, teachers, and others in the school community questioned the need for secrecy in the process, and the timing of the revelation about the cameras in Newton North.

Cheryl Turgel, president of the Newton Teachers Association, said: "Why all the secrecy? If there's no intent to deceive us, why the secrecy? Doing something like this and not disclosing it to the faculty is troublesome to me."

Young said he disclosed the Newton North cameras for reasons of "transparency, so we can take a fresh and clean look at how we're going to deal with security issues in the schools."

He also said that he took responsibility for the decisions to use the cameras and that he is "confident that any future determinations around security will be handled in a more open and public way."
The cameras in both schools are not active and will not be used unless the School Committee authorizes their use, Young said.

"There are no security cameras in any other Newton schools," Young said in his letter. ■

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