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School district installs cameras in every class, hall

JACKSON, Mississippi (AP) -- Students in Biloxi public schools started classes this week under the watchful eye of Webcams that will keep track of every classroom and hallway.

School and security officials said they believed Biloxi is one of the first districts in the nation to install cameras in every classroom.

Biloxi started installing the cameras two years ago, and now that the project is complete, there are more than 500 cameras in district schools, said Deputy Superintendent Robert Voles.

The cameras, which don't record sound, are contained in circular domes on the ceiling, giving a sweeping view of the classroom. Administrators can view the images on the Internet by entering a password.

Voles said the camera installation is a precaution, and that students and teachers have said they feel safer. The cameras were paid for with casino revenue received by the district, which has 6,500 students.

"They've been well received in the community," he said. "We have not had any problems or complaints whatsoever."

Roy Balentine of CameraWATCH Corp., a company that specializes in school security, said it is unique for a district to install them in every classroom. He said there are probably few, if any others that have done so.

The U.S. Department of Education and several national education groups said they don't keep data on surveillance in schools.



A camera in a ceiling of a computer lab at Beauvoir Elementary School in Mississippi.

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Who's watching?

The district has not yet written its policy on how the cameras will be used, Voles said, but the list of people who can view the tapes is limited.

Only a school principal, vice principal, superintendent, school board member or board attorney can view the recordings, he said. A parent, student or teacher would have to go through court.

State Rep. Les Barnett Jr. says having cameras in the classrooms of North Bay Elementary School, where his two children are enrolled, gives him a sense of security.

"It's a shame that we've come to a point that we have to do this in our schools," he said. "I'm not a proponent of Big Brother looking in, but this does involve the safety of my kids."

But Maryann Graczyk, president of the Mississippi American Federation of Teachers, worried about how the cameras would affect teacher rapport with students. She doubts the cameras will act as enough of a crime deterrent to justify the intrusion -- or the \$2 million it cost to install them.

"In observance of the democratic process, we're willing to give up a lot of privacy ... in the interest of safety," she said. "I'm not sure it's the right thing to do."

She also said she is troubled by inability of students, parents or teachers to see the recordings without going to court.

"If my child in school is accused of something ... I would certainly want to see that," she said.

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