



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on April 21, 2010

School Snoops on Students at Home Via Computer Camera

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The Lower Merion, Pennsylvania, school district lent high school sophomore Blake Robbins an Apple MacBook laptop last fall, and then utilized security software on the computer's webcam to take pictures of him in his home. The pictures involved him sleeping and getting dressed, but the school district's information systems coordinator Carol Cafiero contends in a lawsuit that Robbins had "no legitimate expectation of privacy" with the laptop.



In the [words](#) of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "Blake Robbins should have known better."

Cafiero had earlier [pled](#) her Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination in a court subpoena on the civil lawsuit initiated by the Robbins family. The whole issue came to light after Blake's parents saw one of the pictures in Blake's school file. [According to](#) the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Blake had a confrontation back in November 2009 with Assistant Vice Principal Lindy Matsko over one of the pictures taken in his bedroom. "She called him into the office and told him, basically, 'I've been watching what was on the Web cam and saw what was in your hands,' " lawyer Mark S. Haltzman said, according to the *Inquirer*. " 'I've been reading what you've been typing, and I'm afraid you are involved in drugs and trying to sell pills.' " What Matsko thought were masses of illegal drugs were actually Mike & Ike's licorice candies, Robbins later explained.

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Blake Robbins [objected](#) to the school policy where "someone accessed my webcam and provided Ms. Matsko with a screenshot and a webcam picture of me alone in my bedroom." Matsko countered in a [verbal statement](#) before the school committee: "At no time have I ever monitored a student via a laptop web cam."

But Blake Robbins countered in a written statement he [read](#) to the press outside of his home that "Nothing with Ms. Matsko statement is inconsistent with what we stated in our complaint. Ms. Matsko does not deny that she saw a webcam picture and screenshot of me in my home; she only denies that she was the one who activated that webcam."

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* has reported that the wealthy suburban Philadelphia school district (spending \$21,663 per student last year) collected a total of some 56,000 student images, including screen grabs and web-cam shots, before terminating the surveillance after it was revealed to the press. "The tracking program took images every 15 minutes, usually capturing the webcam photo of the user and a screen shot at the same time," the *Inquirer* [reported](#).



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Of course, if the school district had done nothing wrong, there would have been no need to hide the policy or to terminate it when the press began reporting on it. As Lillie Coney of the Electronic Privacy Information Center [put it](#): “If they thought it was right, they wouldn’t have stopped. But they weren’t thinking. And they weren’t planning to get caught. So they didn’t tell anybody.”

In the two months since it was [first exposed in the press](#), the issue has grown into a national privacy issue. According to [FoxNews.com](#), “The FBI has opened a criminal investigation into possible wiretap violations by the district.” And Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter has [called for Senate hearings](#) on the issue.

At the center of the issue is the fact that Apple had said that only law enforcement should be able to use the security software. And Blake Robbins stressed in his press conference that the district’s own experts had testified that they didn’t need to activate the webcams in order to locate the computers, stating that “an employee makes it clear that the software is able to gather enough information, in his words, in order for the police to locate the laptop without ever activating the webcam We are thankful that the lawsuit has been successful in getting the peeping tom software turned off.”

Photo: AP Images



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