

Denebola

The Official Newspaper of Newton South High School

Olivia DaDalt and Alex Schneider, Editors in Chief
Clara Fraden and Jason Kuo, Managing Editors
George Abbott White, Advisor

Denebola@denebolaonline.net
617.559.6572
617.559.2085
www.denebolaonline.net

Comments / Common questions about the story

The story was written by managing editor Jason Kuo and news editor Nathan Yeo. The story came to our attention five weeks before our publication date on December 19th, 2007, prior to our publication of our November issue on November 21, 2007. We chose not to publish the story, however, without sufficient information from our principal, Brian Salzer, who was in China.

Three important clarifications: 1 - Brian Salzer did not authorize the installation of the cameras. 2 - There are no cameras located in bathrooms. Four of five watch bathroom doors, though. 3 – The cameras were not operational at the time of the publication of the story. The intent, however, was for the cameras to become operational without the knowledge of the public.

How did the newspaper learn about the cameras?

Our information came from a number of sources, all of which we corroborated independently. One important way in which we corroborated the information was a simple search on Google, which reveals hidden cameras similar to those installed on the ceilings in the building.

Why did the newspaper decide to publish the story?

We accounted for the fact that the cameras were installed as secret cameras. We felt that the right of the public to know, however, outweighed any surveillance concerns, especially when we found a number of officials to be ambivalent about the installation of the cameras.

The fundamental question was the purpose of the cameras: security or surveillance. Are the cameras there to prevent crime or there to get students into trouble after the crime is committed?

What has been the reaction to the story?

We have heard about a number of classes dedicating their class time to discussing the issue. Students have also been discussing the issue independently.

What are your thoughts about the impact of the story?

One of the premises of running the article was that the community should know and have a discussion before cameras are installed. Most schools around the area have cameras - and they do not even have open campus as does our school. The expectation of the community, however, seems to be that students, teachers, parents, and administrators should know beforehand.

On a more personal level, we feel that it is important that something that we published is going to positively effect change in the community. It wasn't our intention to change the system, but if something we wrote can provide for a more open, honest, and better functioning community, than we are proud about that.

Secret cameras installed

By Nathan Yeo and Jason Kuo

Without notifying the public, administrators in the Newton Public Schools installed five security cameras at Newton South at the beginning of the 2007 school year.

According to Principal Brian Salzer, the Newton Public Schools installed the cameras in response to an increase of vandalism and theft last year, in which several boy's bathrooms were vandalized and items were stolen from locker rooms.

The cameras are not yet operational, and Salzer is unsure when the installation will be completed. Technicians recently installed software that would allow his computer to view the cameras's footage from the past 31 days.

Two cameras are located near the locker rooms and are enclosed in black translucent domes. Three others are in halls around the school and are disguised as smoke detectors. They have clear views of bathrooms that school administrators believe are at most risk of vandalism.

If a bathroom is vandalized, Salzer could access footage on his computer from one of the three cameras pointed at bathrooms around the school. Similarly, if there is an incident of theft in the locker room, he can review footage from the two cameras outside of the locker rooms.

According to Salzer, only he, Superintendent Jeff Young, Director of Public Facilities Mike Cronin, and a small security team were aware of the cameras. They did not inform faculty members, and the Newton Fire and Police Departments are not involved in their operations.

"It's just us trying to keep the school safe for you," Salzer said.

Young and Cronin declined to comment.

The School Committee was not informed beforehand of the decision to install the cameras. A few committee members, including Chair Dori Zaleznik and Vice-Chair Marc Laredo, only recently learned of the decision. Contacted by *Denebola*, they declined to comment until they had more information.

Salzer wanted to inform the South community about the cameras in order to deter future vandalism, rather than catch vandals in the act.

"My school of thought is to tell everyone about them, show how they work, in order to discourage vandalism," he said. "I'd rather have kids know that there are cameras...I don't like playing the 'gotcha' game."

Newton Public Schools administrators, however, chose not to make a public statement about the installation of the cameras.

Salzer was not a part of the decision to install the cameras during the summer.

Salzer nevertheless believes that surveillance cameras can be effective tools for administrators. He recalled an incident last year where a custodian found graffiti in a bathroom that was still dripping paint. Salzer believes that if South administrators had access to securities cameras at the time, they would have easily apprehended the vandal or vandals.

Staff Attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation of Massachusetts Sarah Wunsch notes that, while the legalities of putting surveillance cameras in schools without notifying the public is a rather gray area, South's installation is "at the very least, an awful thing to do."

Wunsch questions the effectiveness of surveillance cameras. Wunsch finds that, in deterring crime, surveillance cameras have a poor track record.

"Studies tend to show police video monitoring has had little or no effect on reducing crime," she wrote in a statement for the ACLU. She cited that in Britain, although the government placed cameras throughout the region, there has actually been an increase in the amount of violent crime.

Newton Teachers Association (NTA) President Cheryl Turgel is unsure whether the cameras violate teacher contract agreements or faculty privacy rights. The Newton Public Schools did not warn the NTA prior to the camera installation of their decision. While Turgel is not necessarily opposed to the Newton Public Schools using surveillance cameras to deter vandalism, she feels that the NTA should have warned of the installation.

"The fact that they did this and didn't inform us about it is really concerning," Turgel said.

Despite criticism of the effectiveness of surveillance cameras, many other school systems in Massachusetts employ security cameras to prevent vandalism, some in large numbers.

Former South Principal and current Framingham High School Principal Michael Welch said that his school uses 17 cameras. These monitor the exterior entries of the building, including the main entrance, gym and lobby.

The cameras record digital video but not audio, which can be accessed for up to 12 days before it is overwritten. According to Welch, both students and the School Committee know about these cameras.

The cameras have helped clarify student altercations and in one instance will be introduced as evidence in a court case involving

the unarmed robbery of a Framingham student.

Welch believes there is a “constantly shifting balance” between the rights of individuals and the rights of society.

“In my judgment, we will find ourselves more and more under surveillance as the rights of individuals will be supplanted by the interests pressing for general safety,” Welch said.

At Natick High School, cameras are easily recognizable, and are accompanied by signs that read: “This area may be under random video surveillance.”

According to Natick High School Assistant Principal Zack Galvin, the City of Natick installed their cameras in the middle of last year to discourage students and the groups who use the school after hours from vandalizing the facilities.

“They have helped deter a lot of vandalization,” Galvin said.

Dorchester Public schools also use cameras to deter vandalism. According to Dorchester Public Schools Facilities Planner Mike Lynch, there are around 30 to 40 cameras in the new high school in Dorchester.

While there are no signs around the cameras, they are encased in black glass spheres, similar to those at South, and none are disguised as smoke detectors.

“[Being able to see the cameras] depends on how astute you are,” Lynch said. Lynch notes that the majority of students know the locations of the cameras.

After working with surveillance systems for over 25 years in both the U.S. Navy and at a paper mill, Lynch believes that cameras should serve as a “strategic deterrent” rather than solely a means to catch vandals.

“If people know the system is there, they will not commit these acts,” he said.

Former Newton South history teacher, North Housemaster and current Principal of Weston High School Anthony Parker described the use of cameras as a “tricky issue.” While Weston does not use security cameras, he believes they can be sometimes be effective. Ultimately however, Parker thinks that nothing will truly prevent determined vandals.

Parker also thinks that there are real privacy issues raised by the use of cameras.

“There’s a fine line between the public safety and Big Brother,” he said.

Parker also said that he’s been on “both sides of the fence” regarding informing the community about cameras. He believes that on the one hand, it is important for the community to be informed. On the other hand, however, he believes that telling people in some ways “defeats the purpose.”

“We not only want to stop the behavior, we want to hold [those who commit it] accountable.”

Several members of South Senate reacted with surprise and

opposition to the planned secret use of video cameras.

South Senator and junior Bill Humphrey thinks that students should be informed of any cameras installed to prevent vandalism. Humphrey believes that it is much better for cameras to act as deterrents rather than a way to catch vandals.

“[Not telling people] is the fundamentally wrong approach,” he said. “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Once you catch someone, the damage is already done.”

Humphrey plans to introduce legislation in South Senate in opposition to the cameras. He expects that many other senators will support it.

Recently elected Senate President Ben Tabb said he did not have enough information to comment at this time.

South Senator and Sophomore Luckmini Liyanage also expressed opposition to the use of cameras that the public was uninformed about.

“I think it’s preposterous that cameras were installed without telling students,” she said. “Students have a right to know.”