STUDENT OPINION

Should Facial Recognition Technology Be Used in Schools?

Will it makes schools safer? Or infringe upon our privacy?

By Jeremy Engle

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Facial recognition is a technology that uses statistical measurements of people's facial features to digitally identify them in photos, videos or real time.

In many airports in the United States, Customs and Border Protection uses facial recognition to screen passengers on international flights. In Florida, the police use the technology to identify suspects by searching databases of images, including driver's licenses. It is now a convenient feature to help consumers unlock their phones. The pop star Taylor Swift is said to use facial recognition to identify stalkers.

Recently, a school district in New York adopted the technology in the name of safety. Do you think facial recognition will make our schools safer? Or infringe upon our privacy?

In "Facial Recognition Moves Into a New Front: Schools," Davey Alba writes:

> Jim Shultz tried everything he could think of to stop facial recognition technology from entering the public schools in Lockport, a small city 20 miles east of Niagara Falls. He posted about the issue in a Facebook group called Lockportians. He wrote an Op-Ed in The New York Times. He filed a petition with the superintendent of the district, where his daughter is in high school.

> But a few weeks ago, he lost. The Lockport City School District turned on the technology to monitor who's on the property at its eight schools, becoming the first known public school district in New York to adopt facial recognition, and one of the first in the nation.

> The district, said Mr. Shultz, 62, "turned our kids into lab rats in a high-tech experiment in privacy invasion."

> A few cities, like San Francisco and Somerville, Mass., have barred their governments from using the technology, but they are exceptions. More than 600 law enforcement agencies started using the technology of one company, Clearview AI, in just the past year. Airports and other public venues, like Madison Square Garden in Manhattan, have adopted it as well.

> Schools are a newer front, and the debate that took place in Lockport encapsulates the furor surrounding the technology. Proponents call it a crucial crime-fighting tool, to help prevent mass shootings and stop sexual predators. Robert LiPuma, the Lockport City School District's director of technology, said he believed that if the technology had been in place at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., the deadly 2018 attack there may never have happened.

> "You had an expelled student that would have been put into the system, because they were not supposed to be on school grounds," Mr. LiPuma said. "They snuck in through an open door. The minute they snuck in, the system would have identified that person."

> But opponents like Mr. Shultz say the concerns about facial recognition — namely privacy, accuracy and racial bias — are even more worrisome when it comes to children.

> "Subjecting 5-year-olds to this technology will not make anyone safer, and we can't allow invasive surveillance to become the norm in our public spaces," said Stefanie Coyle, deputy director of the Education Policy Center for the New York Civil Liberties Union. "Reminding people of their greatest fears is a disappointing tactic, meant to distract from the fact that this product is discriminatory, unethical and not secure."

The article continues:

When the system is on, Mr. LiPuma said, the software looks at the faces captured by the hundreds of cameras and calculates whether those faces match a "persons of interest" list made by school administrators.

That list includes sex offenders in the area, people prohibited from seeing students by restraining orders, former employees who are barred from visiting the schools and others deemed "credible threats" by law enforcement.

If the software detects a person on the list, the Aegis system sends an alert to one of 14 rotating part- and full-time security personnel hired by Lockport, Mr. LiPuma said. The human monitor then looks at a picture of the person in the database to "confirm" or "reject" a match with the person on the camera.

If the operator rejects the match, the alert is dismissed. If the match is confirmed, another alert goes out to a handful of district administrators, who decide what action to take.

Many critics fear bias and misuse of facial recognition programs:

Critics of the technology, including Mr. Shultz and the New York Civil Liberties Union, point to the growing evidence of racial bias in facial recognition systems. In December, the federal government released a study, one of the largest of its kind, that found that most commercial facial recognition systems exhibited bias, falsely identifying African-American and Asian faces 10 to 100 times more than Caucasian faces. Another federal study found a higher rate of mistaken matches among children.

In Lockport, black students are disproportionately disciplined. In the 2015-16 school year, 25 percent of suspended students in the district were black even though enrollment was only 12 percent black, according to data from the federal Department of Education.

Jason Nance, a law professor at the University of Florida, warns that listing students as "persons of interest" could have unintended consequences:

"If suspended students are put on the watch list, they are going to be scrutinized more heavily," he said, which could lead to a higher likelihood that they could enter into the criminal justice system.

Jayde McDonald, a political science major at Buffalo State College, grew up as one of the few black students in Lockport public schools. She said she thought it was too risky for the school to install a facial recognition system that could automatically call the police.

"Since the percentages for the false matches are so high, this can lead to very dangerous and completely avoidable situations," Ms. McDonald said.

She added that she believed police officers would "do whatever it takes in order to stop a suspicious person," even if that person was a young student in school.

Students, read the entire article, then tell us:

- Should facial recognition be used in schools? If so, why? If not, what limits should be placed on its use?

- Have you ever used any kind of facial recognition technology — say, to verify your identity at the airport, unlock your smartphone, sort and tag photos online, or anything else?

- What are some of the potential benefits of schools using facial recognition technology? Robert LiPuma, the Lockport City School District's director of technology, believes that if the technology had been in place, the school shooting in Parkland, Fla., may never have happened. Do you agree?

- What are the potential dangers of facial recognition in schools? Jim Shultz, a parent, argues that the Lockport City School District's decision to use facial recognition has "turned our kids into lab rats in a high-tech experiment in privacy invasion." How persuasive are his arguments against the district's decision?

- Studies have shown that some of the most popular surveillance systems exhibited bias, falsely identifying African-American and Asian faces 10 to 100 times more than Caucasian faces and exhibiting a higher rate of mistaken matches among children. How worried should we be about bias and what Jason Nance calls the unintended consequences of facial recognition in schools?

- How safe do you feel in your school? What safety procedures are currently in place? Assemblywoman Monica Wallace says:

"We all want to keep our children safe in school, but there are more effective, proven ways to do so that are less costly."

She said school districts could, for instance, take smaller steps like upgrading entrances and exits, hiring school resource officers, and investing in counselors and social workers.

Do you agree? If yes, what safety alternatives would you propose for your school?

- Finally, would you recommend that your school use facial recognition technology? If it were used in your school, do you think you would feel safer? Why or why not?

Students 13 and older are invited to comment. All comments are moderated by the Learning Network staff, but please keep in mind that once your comment is accepted, it will be made public.

Jeremy Engle joined The Learning Network as a staff editor in 2018 after spending more than 20 years as a classroom humanities and documentary-making teacher, professional developer and curriculum designer working with students and teachers across the country.