

Big Brother Is Watching: Video Surveillance on Buses

By Joel Sloggett, MCIP, RPP



Matt and Brandon were neighbors and shared a common school bus stop. Although it started as a normal winter school day, things soon took a turn for the worse. Matt had argued with his mom at breakfast and carried his frustrations with him to the bus stop. Brandon was a little smaller than Matt and made for an easy target. Within minutes, Matt was pummeling Brandon with snowballs and pushing him into snowbanks and slush.

When the bus pulled up to the stop, the boys got on. As always, they shared a seat. During the ride to school, Matt quietly teased Brandon and punched him in the arm repeatedly. No one else, including the driver, seemed to notice. Once at school, the boys separated and the day passed. On the ride home, Brandon sat by himself in an empty seat.

That night, Brandon told his mom about the trouble at the bus stop that day and she called the school principal to report the incident. The next day, the principal spoke with the bus driver and learned that she had not seen any of what Brandon described.

Brandon's mom alleged that this was not the first bullying incident, so the principal decided to request the installation of a surveillance camera on the bus. Before installation, the principal sent a letter to the parents of all the students on the bus advising them of the need to use the camera to monitor activity.

The camera was installed within a few days, and a week passed with no evidence of bullying. Eventually, Matt resumed his pattern of poor behavior. After reviewing film of activity on the bus, the principal determined

that Matt was indeed teasing, bullying, and bothering Brandon on a regular basis.

The principal met with Matt's parents, suspended Matt from school for two days, and required that the boys be separated while riding on the bus. After two weeks, the camera was removed from the bus and the bullying situation was resolved to the satisfaction of all parties.

Video Cameras 101

Many school districts in North America have adopted policies to permit cameras on their properties and, when needed, on buses used to transport students. With regard to school buses, the camera is typically a tool for gathering information to monitor behavior or to help investigate a complaint about behavior. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a video showing what happened during the time of an alleged incident on a school bus is a full dictionary.

In most cases, the principal initiates and oversees the process, which includes the initial request, followed by camera placement, film collection, and completion of the investigation.

The fictitious example involving Brandon and Matt captures many of the elements involved in using a surveillance camera as an administrative tool. In some ways, though, the outcome of this investigation was almost too good to be true.

Often, images may not clearly capture an incident and it could take an extended period of use to actually record helpful information. There is also an ever-present risk that someone, whether a student's family or the bus driver, may take offense to the filming. Why would they be concerned? Perhaps they feel their privacy is being infringed on or they just don't trust those in charge to use the medium in a fair and confidential manner. These sorts of challenges may undermine and possibly threaten the district's approach to using cameras as an administrative tool.

Roles and Responsibilities

A key consideration in defending the school district's position to use cameras on buses is effective control over recorded film. Clear delineation of roles and responsibilities must be established through policies and procedures that, in turn, are widely communicated and thoroughly understood.

The school principal has a central role, followed by transportation department personnel and management at the bus company if it is separate from the district's transportation department. Whether or not a bus driver is part of the reason for the investigation, it is inappropriate for the driver to control or view recordings. In addition, parents of the children involved should not be permitted to view the videotape, as that would infringe on the privacy of other students. Limiting viewing and

access to those who are responsible for investigating and acting on complaints is an obvious requirement for protecting privacy.

Like all other data gathered by school districts, videotape is subject to governing privacy legislation. School district policy must reference its source of authority for gathering data. Electing to use a camera on a school bus is a big step aimed at helping ensure safe and secure transport of passengers who are most often minors. Cameras should be tools of last resort, and recorded information should be treated as confidential and with the utmost respect.

Benefits of Surveillance

Principals and transportation staff who use cameras on buses consider them helpful in dealing with issues in a timely and effective manner. Actual footage of an incident provides clear evidence of who is responsible and who did what on the bus. Without a camera, the principal would need to interview many students to try to get a picture of what may have happened on the bus. That would take a great deal of time and might yield inconclusive results. By and large, the use of cameras avoids extra work associated with traditional investigation and information collection.

Bus drivers may be willing parties to the process but they may be reluctant at times, worried that the recording is intended to monitor them and their driving habits rather than deal with other issues.

Depending on the vantage point of students and their parents (i.e., the complainant, the defendant, or neutral party), they may support camera use, dislike it, or have no opinion at all. To date, concerns regarding camera use have been limited and have been handled by district and transportation staff by explaining district policies. However, as society evolves and privacy concerns become more widespread, questions may arise on a more regular basis, and districts will be taken to task over their use of recording devices on school buses.

What's Next?

From traditional, single-tape video cameras to cutting-edge digital recording units, there are many options for school districts to consider. With the newest units, it is possible to have multiple cameras recording to a single computer unit and providing views of the driver, the interior front, and interior back of the bus, as well as the stop arm and side of the bus (to film drivers who illegally pass a stopped or loading/unloading school bus). The only limiting factors for new camera technology are vendor imagination and district purchasing budgets.

School districts must carefully consider the level of financial commitment needed to support camera use. A basic, single-camera system could cost \$1,000 or more, whereas a deluxe digital system may run close to \$3,000

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per unit. Higher-cost units provide better-quality recordings, which, in turn, contribute to more effective investigation of incidents. Outfitting a fleet of 100 buses may not be possible; using a few rotating units may be a better option for those who are cash strapped. The bottom line is what do you need and what can you afford?

Does the school district have the right to videotape students riding on school buses? For school districts that enact appropriate policies, the answer is yes. For families of individuals who may wish to question use of cameras, the perceived answer may be no. As time marches on and as society evolves, a common answer to the question may emerge.

In the meantime, districts and their agents will continue to use cameras as a tool to support the provision of safe environments on school buses. In doing so, districts will err on the side of caution in protecting the precious cargo riding on our school buses.

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