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Schools add background checks for visitors

Some critics express privacy concerns, but supporters say measure keeps children safe



School secretary Jen Bendy scans an ID for a visitor using a new security system called Hall Pass at Alex M. Martino Junior High School in New Lenox. (Photo for the Tribune by Mike Burley / December 1, 2009)

By Joseph Ruzich
Special to the Tribune
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New Lenox School District 122 gives Marilee Lotz a background check every time she volunteers at one of her children's schools. The security system has been in use since October and is designed to alert school officials if a visitor is a registered sex offender or has committed violent crimes against children.

The check takes a few minutes, but Lotz doesn't mind.

"It makes kids safer," said Lotz, who has a son in fifth grade and a daughter in third in District 122. "They (sex offenders and criminals) are probably the only ones who don't like it. Even though it takes a little longer for parents or volunteers to get into the school, the safety aspect makes it worth it."

But the safety measure used by at least three school districts in the south suburbs raises questions about privacy and

practicality, some critics say.

"I think there is a question on whether or not this is the most effective way to keep kids safe," said Ed Yohnka of the [American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois](#). "Who are these visitors (at the schools) roaming the halls unescorted? You would think school officials would know where visitors are going and what they are doing at all times."

Yohnka said he also worries about license and ID information being stored on district computer systems, adding that school officials could decide to check individuals and parents for other types of crimes in the

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future.

District 122 implemented the new background check policy and security system, called Hall Pass, at all 12 of its kindergarten centers and elementary and junior high schools this fall. The district, which has 5,700 students and about 600 staff members, is one of the first in the south suburbs to install the system, along with Joliet Public Schools District 86 and Homewood-Flossmoor Community High School District 233 in Flossmoor.

Visitors at any school in District 122 must produce a driver's license or state identification to an employee at the front desk. It is scanned and a computer uses the information on the card to conduct a 30-second background check on the National Sex Offender Registry and Illinois State Police Child Murderer and Violent Offender Against Youth Registry. Once cleared by the system, a temporary visitor's pass is printed.

District 122 spokeswoman Jenny Zimmerman said the new security measures are not in response to any specific incident. "We want our children to have a safe learning environment," Zimmerman said. "So far, we have heard mostly positive feedback about it."

Zimmerman stressed that the system primarily is to ferret out sex offenders. "The law prohibits them from being on school property anyway. We don't care if someone has a DUI or was convicted of tax evasion," Zimmerman said.

Jason Livezey, director of technology for District 122, said the system cost \$20,000 and an additional \$4,800 a year in fees.

Schoolchildren's "safety is worth the cost," said Livezey. "I think most schools will have (the checks) in the future."

Livezey said he spent months trying to find the perfect system, trying demos of several, but liked Hall Pass the best because it is user-friendly and more affordable.

District 86 has been testing a similar system for a year at its junior high schools. Sandy Zalewski, spokeswoman for District 86, said the system has worked well but it is still under evaluation by district officials.

Its system, called Raptor, also scans driver's licenses and state IDs, like Hall Pass.

"Safety is our No. 1 priority," Zalewski said. "Parents need to know that their kids are safe at school."

The district has a protocol for parents who are registered sex offenders. Zalewski said the superintendent must give permission for a registered sex offender to enter school grounds and sex offenders must be accompanied by a staff member at all times.

District 122 has not developed a policy for parents who are registered sex offenders because "the issue hasn't come up," Zimmerman said.

According to the Illinois Sex Offender Web site, New Lenox has six registered sex offenders and Joliet has more than 200. Flossmoor and Homewood have a combined 13 registered sex offenders.

Donna Feehan, 39, has a daughter in third grade at Haines Elementary School in New Lenox and supports the new system.

"If it prevents one child from being abducted or hurt, it's worth it," Feehan said. "You just never know what might happen these days."

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Here we go again.... Another invasion of privacy! Why don't they just lock-down the school, put a tall barbed wire fence and dig a moat!?! THEN put in one entrance (Check point Charlie) and shake people down for their papers.

chitownirish63 (12/04/2009, 9:29 PM)

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What prompted the installation of these systems? Have sex offenders posing as volunteers been a problem in these schools? In any schools? Ever? It seems that they are throwing money at a statistically insignificant risk. They'd be better off teaching kids skills to protect themselves against those who might harm them in any setting, as the vast majority of sex abuse victims know their

perpetrators as relatives, family friends, coaches, etc.

hollyberry9 (12/04/2009, 9:12 PM)

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Excellent security check! It's worth every penny. And every minute anyone is inconvenienced. By keeping the trash out.

david.osedach (12/04/2009, 5:38 PM)

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