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## Hi-tech answers to pupil problems

By Jane Wakefield  
BBC News technology staff

**The perennial school problems of bullying and truancy are back on the agenda as education minister Ruth Kelly pledges a tough stance on school discipline.**



Bullying is a huge problem for some pupils

Schools are increasingly spending large sums of money on software designed to help combat these issues but just how effective is the technology and can it really help fight both the bullies and children who simply refuse to go to school?

Text Someone is a one of several systems on the market, which offers pupils the chance to beat the bullies via a technology they are all familiar with - the text message.

Incidents of bullying can be reported at any time of day or night via text message, e-mail or voice message.

The system has been up and running in at the Whitstone Community School, a 770-pupil secondary school in Shepton Mallet for three weeks.

### Taken advantage

Several pupils have already taken advantage of the system, said assistant headmaster Alan Tucker.

"Under the old system they may or may not have gone to a teacher but texting is something they are familiar with using," he said.

"Some children were slipping through the net. They didn't want to talk to a teacher and this is just another method of communicating their problems," he added.

The statistics bear out the need for action in this area. It is estimated that between 15 and 20 children take their own lives each year as a result of being bullied.

### Too embarrassed

Research by children's charity Childline suggests that 86% of youngsters are too embarrassed to talk about their problems.

Text Someone is the latest service from Truancy Call, a company which also provides an automated parent notification system as a first step in dealing with truants.

**“ Our children are not pieces of inventory ”**

Jeffrey and Michelle Tatro

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Director Stephen Clarke believes the key to the texting service is using technology that children are familiar with.

"Many of the schools using it are ones with strong student councils where pupils can see the benefit of it," he said.

The firm's other piece of software - Truancy Call - has been installed in 450 schools across the UK. The system links in with attendance registers and highlights any pupils who are absent without a valid reason.

The system automatically triggers a phone call or a text message telling parents that their child is not in school and requesting the parent phone the school.

If no response is forthcoming the system remains persistent - calling the parent every hour until 8pm.

Mr Clarke acknowledges that, while the system can make it far easier for schools to keep track of absent students it is by no means the full solution



Paper registers are rapidly being replaced by electronic ones

"Letting parents know about attendance helps to a certain degree but it is not going to get to the root cause of why that child has skipped school," he said.

### Government backing

According to the Department for Education, school attendance in the UK has improved with 17,000 more pupils regularly attending school every day in the last year - 40,000 more than in 1996/97.

Part of this may be down to its own backing for technology to improve the way registers of pupils are taken.

It has made £11.25m available to fund the so-called Electronic Registration Project in secondary schools and so far 536 schools have had their electronic register plans approved.

"LEAs and schools tailor a range of measures according to the local situation. This might include electronic registration systems which confirm the attendance of each pupil in every class, and can reduce unauthorised absence rates by up to 10%," said a spokesman for the Department for Education and Skills.

Despite the upbeat figures from the government, there are still around 50,000 who are not at school on any given day so the need to improve attendance is obvious.

The idea that children are wandering the streets rather than staying in the relatively safe environment of school can be extremely worrying for parents and any technology that keeps track of their movement could be tempting.

### Pieces of inventory

In the US, schools are increasingly using Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags as a way of keeping tabs on where students are at any given time.

**“ Compelling children to be constantly tracked with RFID-trackable identity badges breaches their right to privacy and dignity as human beings ”**

Cedric Laurant, EPIC

The use of such technology has sparked controversy among civil liberties groups such as the US-based Electronic Privacy Information Centre (EPIC).

This month the organisation sent a letter to the Brittan School District in Northern California, urging them to cease use of RFIDs.

"The monitoring of children with RFID tags is comparable to the tracking of cattle, shipment pallets, or very dangerous criminals," said Cedric Laurant, a lawyer with EPIC.

"Compelling children to be constantly tracked with RFID-trackable identity badges breaches their right to privacy and dignity as human beings," he added.

Parents too are beginning to reject such extreme methods of keeping tabs on their children.

Jeffrey and Michelle Tatro, parents of a 13-year-old student at Brittan Elementary School in California, are backing the civil rights campaign.

"We want it stopped here and we don't want any child to be tracked anywhere. Our children are not pieces of inventory," they said.

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