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Students in Texas to be monitored with microchips

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Students walk through campus between classes at Santa Monica College in Santa Monica, California April 4, 2012 (Reuters/Bret Hartman)

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If it's good enough for a dog, it's good enough for a kid, right? A school district in Texas will be watching over its students a lot more closely, but not with the aid of extra teachers. Instead each pupil will be monitored with microchips.

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Officials at the Northside Independent School District in rural Bexar County, Texas have approved a plan to track the whereabouts of each and every student by requiring them to walk the halls with identification cards in their pockets that are equipped with RFID microchips.



By using Radio Frequency Identification System technology, teachers and faculty will be able to monitor the move of over 6,000 students at two select schools and every pupil with special needs throughout the

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district as soon as next semester. If the pilot program is a success, the district intends on expanding the tracking system to all of its 112 schools, totaling nearly 100,000 students.

Backers of the program say the move is well intentioned and will actually bring the school millions of dollars in extra funding. Ghastly attendance rates in Bexar County currently keeps the district from earning around \$175,000 a day in state assistance, reports KHOU News out of San Antonio, TX. Speaking to that city's Express-News, district spokesman Pascual Gonzalez explains that the school wants *"to harness the power of (the) technology to make schools safer, know where our students are all the time in a school, and increase revenue."*

When each step of the students is being watched by administrators, the district expects to see their absentee count drop drastically. But is it worth the cost of killing the privacy of thousands?

"It's going to give us the opportunity to track our students in the building," Principal Wendy Reyes of Jones Middle School tells KHOU. *"They may have been in the nurse's office, or the counselor's office, or vice principal's office, but they were marked absent from the classroom because they weren't sitting in the class. It will help us have a more accurate account of our attendance."*

It will also let teachers know who is in the bathroom and for how long and monitor the group habits of students. It could also become catastrophic, of course, if the very sensitive data ends up in the wrong hands. Similar programs were pitched elsewhere in recent years, but in other instances the American Civil Liberties Union stepped up to speak out; in many cases, the programs were shot down after the ACLU intervened.

"We are urging the school board to recognize the important civil liberties concerns and safety risks implicated in RFID technology," the ACLU's Nicole Ozer, the technology and civil Liberties policy director of their Northern California office, wrote in a statement back in 2005 . *"RFID badges jeopardize the safety and security of children by broadcasting identity and location information to anyone with a chip reader and subject students to demeaning tracking of their movements. We hope the school district reconsiders this serious issue."*

In that case, the ACLU was opposed to a program at Brittan Elementary School Board in Sutter, California where youngsters were being tracked with RFID chips. Even though that kind of technology has become both more advanced and commonplace in the seven years since, it doesn't

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change the concerns that continue to arise.

"The monitoring of children with RFID tags is comparable to the tracking of cattle, shipment pallets, or very dangerous criminals in high-security prisons," Cédric Laurant of EPIC told the ACLU in 2005. "Compelling children to be constantly tracked with RFID-enabled identity badges breaches their right to privacy and dignity as human beings."

But, hey — how else is the school going to raise a few grand?

"I think this is overstepping our bounds and is inappropriate," Northside school board trustee M'Lissa M. Chumbley tells other district officials this week. *"I'm honestly uncomfortable about this."*

Kirsten Bokenkamp of the ACLU tells the San Antonio Express-News that her organization is once again alarmed by Northside's plans to implement the program. They are expected to challenge the board's decision this time around too.

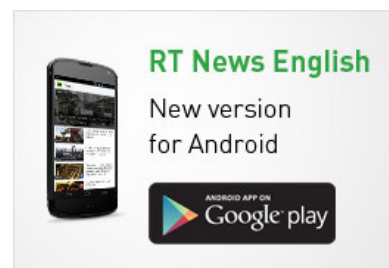
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The advertisement is a vertical banner with a green background. At the top, it asks '¿Ya sabes qué estudiar?' (Do you already know what to study?). Below this are six circular icons: a woman's face, a question mark, three binders, a man's face, a magnifying glass, and a clipboard with a checkmark. The text 'Responde el' (Answer the) is positioned below the icons. The main title '—TEST— de Orientación VOCACIONAL' is in a black box. At the bottom, it features the logos for 'utel UNIVERSITY' and 'PEARSON' with the text 'IN ASSOCIATION WITH'.