



May 12, 2010

Hon. Dr. Margaret MacDiarmid
Minister of Education,
Government of British Columbia
PO Box 9045 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria, BC V8W 9E2

Subject: Surveillance Cameras in Schools - Changes to Bill 20 (School Act)

Dear Minister MacDiarmid,

The Vancouver Public Space Network is concerned about the BC government's proposed changes to the *School Act*, contained in Bill 20, which sets out in law that video surveillance may be used in public schools. It is the Vancouver Public Space Network's position that schools should be free of video surveillance, except as a last resort and when their use is demonstrably justified. Research shows that surveillance cameras are ineffective both at decreasing unwanted behaviour and at catching offenders after the event. The technology is also expensive and in the light of the recent budget shortfalls and layoffs experienced in local school boards, cameras are just too costly, economically and culturally, to be deployed in our schools on the scale that this amendment permits.

The bill states that a school board may install and operate a video surveillance camera in a school facility or on school land for the purposes of protecting the safety of individuals, their belongings or school property. However, this connection is flawed. Our organization is concerned that the BC government has positioned surveillance cameras as an effective tool for protecting the safety of students and school property when research shows that they are not very effective at deterring or solving crimes or bad behaviour.

The amendments to the School Act set out the purposes for which cameras may be used in schools, but fail to set out any specific criteria to guide school boards in their deployment of surveillance cameras - or require school boards to establish such policies. BC's Information and Privacy Commissioner has been recommending for a decade that school boards have policies governing the use of cameras, and the viewing and secure storage of the data they collect (see *Keeping School Safe for Students*, October 27, 2000). While some school boards have such policies, they are not required, and we find this very disconcerting. Even worse than allowing surveillance cameras to be used is allowing them without setting any rules to say under what circumstances they may be deployed, how they should be operated, how students' privacy rights will be safeguarded, who has access to the images, and in which places they are inappropriate. The province should either impose stringent standard rules to avoid the possibility of over-use and abuse of surveillance cameras, or require boards to adopt rules that meet or exceed a tough provincial standard.

A recent study from Britain, where video surveillance is most pervasive, showed that instead of making public space safer, surveillance cameras can have a counterproductive effect because when people assume cameras will capture suspicious behaviour or crimes they do not take action on their observations themselves. Schools are not only the site of scholastic development for children but also the place where they learn how to be active and engaged members of society. We are concerned about the lesson that kids will learn about their responsibilities as citizens if electronic surveillance usurps the human eye as the go-to for ensuring safety.

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Supporters of surveillance cameras often refer to a number of high profile instances where surveillance images helped solve or stop a crime. However according to research done in the UK, the effectiveness of video surveillance has only been demonstrated where it was deployed in tandem with other tools. Given the lack of evidence that surveillance cameras make us any safer, authorizing school boards to spend lots of money on ongoing surveillance capacity is not the best investment, especially given the looming significant budget cuts in local school boards.

The safety of our schools is important, but the tools employed in its protection should infringe on the privacy and security rights of BC children as little as possible. We are eager to engage with you further in dialogue on this issue, and look forward to further correspondence with you and your ministry.

Sincerely,

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