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Student Identification

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Benefits of Biometric Student Identification

By Anne Marie Dunphy

One of the many challenges facing schools today is accurate student identification. Schools need to provide a safe and secure environment for everyone on campus. Now more than ever, accurate student identification is critical to the efficient operations of a school.

Over the past few decades, schools have been implementing all kinds of technology to both enhance learning and improve operations. Smart boards, laptops, and real-time Internet resources are a just part of every day. And now, schools are implementing a new technology, biometric finger scanning, to streamline their operations, increase teaching time, and enhance security.

A Biometrics Primer

When most people think of biometrics, they think about high-security technology, a technology that the government will use for passports and border control, that banks will use to combat identity theft, and that police will use to find criminals. However, the high-cost, high-security, futuristic biometric technology that was unthinkable in a school environment just a few years ago is here...and it's practical and affordable and being used all over the world.

Biometrics is automated methods of recognizing a person based on a physiological or behavioral characteristic. They include face, fingerprint, hand geometry, handwriting, iris, retina, vein, or voice – anything that's a part of you.

Believe it or not, biometrics is not a new technology. The ancient Egyptians used bodily characteristics to identify workers to make sure they didn't claim more provisions than they were entitled, just like governments today are looking at biometrics to lessen fraud. Chinese merchants in the 14th century used palm prints and footprints to identify children. Fingerprint recognition is by far the most developed technology today. It's trusted, cost-effective, and easy to use.

Privacy Issues

Biometric technologies don't conjure up the Orwellian fears they used to. Overall acceptance of biometrics has risen substantially over the past few years due to the aftermath of 9/11, the proliferation of identity theft, technology improvements, and general understanding and awareness. Of course, some people still object at the mention of systems that scan fingerprints, but, for the most part, people are now realizing that biometrics actually protect their privacy, and that, in most biometric applications, their fingerprints are not stored anywhere and can never be recreated from the encrypted digital template.

Practical Applications in Schools

Why would a school use biometrics? Quite simply, it's used to save time and money, thereby improving operations. Biometric technology can also provide benefits in terms of convenience, safety, and security. A typical first installation in a school is in the cafeteria, where accurate records are critical. Schools can then use the same biometric database to "talk" to other applications for attendance, in the nurse's office, the library or media center, and the bus. Once biometrics is being used successfully in one part of a school, the idea migrates and is embraced in other areas, as well. Schools even use it for student identification at athletic events and dances.

Case Studies

Beverly E. Blough MS, RD, LD, director of food service of Wood County, West Virginia, is a pioneer in implementing biometric technology in her schools. She is responsible for serving over 1.8 million meals a year, as well as following all U.S. federal laws for the Child Nutrition Program. One of the requirements is accurate student identification for reimbursement. They were using student ID cards and a nine-digit PIN. On some days, more than 80% of students would show up for lunch without their cards. This meant that the cook had to type in every student ID number. Lines backed up, mistakes were made keying in the numbers, and, each month, irritated parents called claiming their children did not eat the meals they were charged for and the school district had to bear those costs.

"With all of the lost, stolen, and damaged cards, sometimes I thought food service was in the card business rather than serving meals to students! We obviously needed a better solution," said Blough. "We decided that finger scanning biometrics was the solution. Students would never forget their fingers.

Six hundred miles away in Rogersville, Alabama, Debbie Romine, cafeteria manager, was experiencing the same headaches.

"We wanted something that students could not forget, lose, damage, or steal. But, it had to be compatible with our existing cafeteria software, and it had to be cost-effective," she said. "We also needed biometrics that worked with smaller children without any difficulties. In food service, seconds count. Our goal is to keep it simple for the students, my staff, and myself and make it an enjoyable experience to come to the school cafeteria. Since we implemented the biometric system last fall, our food service operation has improved; we're saving time and money. This was the best start of the school year I've had in 21 years. The kindergarten students are just soaring through the lunch lines in record time."

"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." ([Proverbs 15:1](#)) (Read by Max McLean. Provided by [The Listener's Audio Bible](#).)

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And, in Edgefield County, South Carolina, Greg Thompson, principal of Strom Thurmond High School, had yet another requirement. He wanted to use finger scanning biometrics as a complete student identification system throughout his entire school, beginning with the cafeteria, then migrating to the library and finally in each classroom for period-by-period attendance, so he would know where his students were throughout their day.

How's it working?

According to Thompson, "Biometric finger scanning identification was well accepted by the board, superintendent, principals, teachers, parents, and the community. They all understood our need to correctly identify students and realized the time and money it was costing each day to administer our existing program. Initially, there were questions regarding privacy. However, the system doesn't take an actual fingerprint, just unique identifying points. Everyone felt comfortable that the fingerprints can't be recreated. The students are enrolled only once, so we can roll out our finger scanning identification program to different areas of the school. Now, students always have their ID with them!"

Now more than ever, schools need to have cost-effective systems in place to streamline operations and increase security. Biometric technology is being implemented today with many practical and cost-effective uses for schools.

Anne Marie Dunphy is the chief financial officer and co-founder of identiMetrics, www.identimetrics.net.