

Jefferson County schools to begin using finger scanners

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Berkeley County Schools began biometric scanning in 2007; Jefferson County plans to begin using the scanners in two middle schools this fall.

MARTINSBURG - With the quick swipe of a finger, students in Berkeley County are able to pay for lunch in less than a second. Jefferson County plans to implement the same system in two of its middle schools in September.

"Biometric finger scanning is used to improve efficiency in serving students meals and accuracy in billing for those meals. Our schools must balance instructional time and adequate time for meal consumption," said Tracy Heck, director of child nutrition and wellness for Berkeley County Schools.

The scanning software, IdentiMetrics, is a state-adopted program. According to the IdentiMetrics software description, the computer system develops a grid of intersection points from the swirls and arcs on the scanned finger. The unique points are translated into a binary number, which is encrypted and stored. No fingerprint image is stored, and no fingerprint can be recreated from the binary number.

The United States Department of Agriculture requires students to have a "seat time" of 20 minutes for lunch, and according to Heck, the county's goal of using the scanning process is to serve students as efficiently as possible.

"We used to use cards and PIN numbers that were presented by the students as they went through the line. This process was time-consuming and inaccurate. Biometric finger scanning was implemented in Berkeley County Schools beginning in 2007 for middle and high schools and recently for elementary," Heck said.

In early 2012, Jefferson County purchased licenses for the use of IdentiMetrics at Wildwood Middle School and Shepherdstown Middle School. The district plans to begin the implementation process between mid-September and early October.

"This program was chosen to begin in the middle schools because we have four that feed into two high schools. So you have a smaller student body, and those schedules are a little more manageable as to enrolling the students," said Arlene Leonard, coordinator of child nutrition for Jefferson County Schools.

Once the students move up into high school, they are already enrolled in the program. The only new enrollment would be the students who are moving up into fifth grade.

While the ease of processing students through the lunch line is attractive to many school officials, the notion of using "personal information" of the child is unnerving to some parents.

Kristy Ferguson, a Hedgesville Elementary School parent, said it was a lack of communication that concerned her so much. She said she did not receive notification about the biometric scanning until a paper was sent home after the first day of school.

"My child had already had to scan for breakfast and lunch at that point," Ferguson said.

According to Heck, parents are given the opportunity to opt out of the program, and, in the event that the child is mistakenly included, the information would be destroyed, she said.

All information for each student included in the IdentiMetrics program is destroyed once the children graduate from high school.

Jefferson County plans to begin the implementation process by first notifying parents within the upcoming weeks. According to Leonard, Wildwood and Shepherdstown parents who do not want their child to participate in the program need to send in written notification.

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