Minority report: crackdown on facial recognition technology in schools

By Henrietta Cook
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Victoria’s Education Minister James Merlino is clamping down on facial recognition technology in schools, saying the software’s privacy risks makes him “uncomfortable”.

While it might sound like a scene from a sci-fi movie, a small number of Victorian schools have been trialling scanners that sweep classrooms for students’ faces to ensure no one is missing.

But privacy concerns about the technology has promoted the education minister and Victoria’s inaugural Information Commissioner to sound the alarm.

Mr Merlino has ordered the Education Department to immediately assess the software and report back to him.
He's also asked the Department to contact every state school to remind them that they must undertake a privacy impact assessment before considering the software.

"As a parent and as the Minister for Education, I am uncomfortable with such software being used in our schools," he told *The Age*.

The technology replaces the need for teachers to mark the roll at the start of every class.

Small cameras periodically scan classrooms, matching this information with photos of students from school records. If a student is missing, a notification is sent to a designated staff member.

It's been created by Australian start-up LoopLearn and is being tested at an unknown number of Victorian private schools, including Ballarat Clarendon College and Sacred Heart College in Geelong. It was due to be trialled at some state schools, including William Ruthven Secondary College.

But a Department spokeswoman said William Ruthven Secondary College would no longer go ahead with the trial because the school had not done a full privacy impact assessment.

Information Commissioner Sven Bluemmel said the compromising of children's privacy appeared to outweigh the benefits of the technology.

"Do we want our children to feel like it's normal to be constantly under surveillance?" he said.

"There are unique risks for biometrics, which can be used to identify people based on unchangeable personal characteristics. Unlike other categories of identifying information, such as a drivers licence, if biometric information is compromised it is generally not possible to get a new identifier."

But LoopLearn co-founder Zoe Milne said the technology saved teachers valuable time.

"We've found that schools report that the roll marking process can take away up to two and a half hours of lesson time from students every week," she said.

"Schools spend this teaching time, as well as additional time from administration staff, on roll marking because they have a duty to keep students safe."

She said that the technology had been designed with "privacy at its core", complied with all relevant legislation and deleted students' faces once they had been identified.
"To our knowledge, we've gone through all the proper channels and are open to further conversations to ensure that all stakeholders are comfortable with the LoopLearn technology," she said.

Facial recognition technology is becoming increasingly common.

It's used at airports, to unlock the latest iPhones and as part of China's social credit system, which by 2020 will monitor the nation's 1.4 billion citizens using surveillance cameras fitted with facial recognition.

In the US, the technology is being rolled out at schools fearful of shootings. One system allows security officers to respond to expelled students, sex offenders and disgruntled employees whose photos have been uploaded into a system.

A Ballarat Clarendon College student, who did not want to be named, said he didn't like the idea of always being monitored.

"It has a Big Brother type of feeling to it," he said.

But the school's head of research, Greg Ashman, said the school had completed a thorough risk assessment and communicated its plans to the community.

He said if the trial was unsuccessful, the school would walk away from the technology.

Mr Ashman said the technology, which will be used in a handful of classrooms in coming weeks, would maximise the time teachers spent on instruction.

He said marking the roll could be cumbersome, particularly if students had left the class for a music lesson and then returned.

"There is no filming of what students are doing," Mr Ashman said.

"It is really just to check where they are."

Henrietta Cook

Education Editor at The Age

Tough new rules for 'Big Brother' face-reading technology in schools

By Henrietta Cook
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Victorian state schools will be banned from using facial recognition technology unless they secure the approval of parents, students and the Department of Education.

The state government crackdown follows a trial of the technology in independent schools, where scanners have been sweeping classrooms for students' faces to monitor attendance.

Facial recognition is being trialled in several schools as a replacement for calling the roll.
ARTWORK: STEPHEN KIPRILLIS. PHOTO: ALAMY

It also comes after a Department of Education review found this type of technology posed a risk by using and storing students' unique biometric data.

Victorian Education Minister James Merlino said he was uncomfortable about any rollout of "Big Brother style" technology.
He criticised the federal government for awarding Melbourne-based start-up LoopLearn – which is trialling the technology in Australian schools – an almost $500,000 grant to make the product commercially viable.

"I remain concerned about any rollout of this initiative. The fact that Scott Morrison is supporting this Big Brother style system in our classroom does not change that," he said.

"Teachers are best placed to record student attendance, not robots."

Under the new rules, schools must undertake a rigorous privacy assessment of the surveillance technology and receive explicit, informed consent from parents and carers.

"If these things have not been done to a level that alleviates my concerns then no government school will implement the technology," Mr Merlino said.

The new rules are detailed in a memo that will be circulated to state schools on Tuesday afternoon.

After jumping through these hoops, schools must then report back to the Department's privacy team before going ahead with any rollout of the technology.

Victorian private schools that have been trialling LoopLearn include Ballarat Clarendon College and Sacred Heart College in Geelong.

It was due to be trialled at some state schools including William Ruthven Secondary College, but these trials are no longer going ahead due to the department's concerns.

LoopLearn claims that technology promises to save teachers up to 2.5 hours a week by replacing the need for them to mark the roll at the start of every class.

It uses small cameras to scan classrooms for students' faces and then matches this information with photos of students from school records.

If a student is missing, a notification is sent to a staff member.

LoopLearn co-founder Zoe Milne said the start-up had followed the department's advice to schools.

"This process works well as it ensures all key parties are informed about the benefits of LoopLearn and related technologies and also the important safeguards built into the platform," she said.
Ms Milne said teachers, parents and staff had been kept well-informed during trials of the technology.

"Having gone through this process a number of times, we are yet to find a parent who feels uncomfortable with LoopLearn after we explain the safeguards and privacy of the system, and the significant benefit that our technology provides to ensuring their children are safe," she said.

LoopLearn says students’ faces are deleted once they have been identified.

But not all privacy experts are convinced about these safeguards.

Information Commissioner Sven Bluemmel told The Age last year that any benefit of the technology was outweighed by children’s privacy being compromised.

"Do we want our children to feel like it’s normal to be constantly under surveillance?" he asked.

Monash University’s Professor Neil Selwyn said the technology posed huge privacy and consent issues. He said he was particularly concerned about where the data was stored and how it might be used beyond the school.

"We live in a society where this technology is increasingly being used in airports, train stations and shopping centres," he said. "It is going to be increasingly difficult to keep it out of schools."

He said scanning a person’s face was one of the most invasive forms of surveillance.

While facial recognition technology is not yet common in Australian schools, it is becoming popular in US schools where deadly mass shootings have terrified parents, teachers and students.

One system sends alerts to school security officers when expelled students, sex offenders and disgruntled employees have entered the school yarn.

Facial recognition technology is also used to unlock the latest iPhone and is a feature of China’s social credit system, which will monitor the nation’s 1.4 billion citizens using surveillance cameras fitted with facial recognition by 2020.