

CCTV in schools. Legal? Effective?

The coalition government has promised “proper regulation” of CCTV. How will that affect school CCTV?

CCTV is well-established and wide-spread in schools. Two years ago, a survey conducted by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) of 249 primary and secondary school teachers suggested 84.6% had CCTV in their school and 52.9% reported it made them feel safer.

Currently there is a complex raft of legislation surrounding the lawful operation of CCTV systems but no actual regulation to apply the legislation effectively. Nor is the legislation easy to apply as it has to cover a very wide range of uses, so it does not address the fine detail of each individual installation. Specialist CCTV systems installers and equipment suppliers are technically expert but they are not qualified to advise on CCTV regulatory compliance.

The lack of effective regulation means many CCTV systems are neither set up nor managed properly, so they can't prove the evidence has not been tampered with. That makes it easy to discredit in court. If a school needs to rely on CCTV evidence, it is important to set up the system according to the legal operating requirements and to safeguard CCTV images as securely as personal data in a database. Sadly, it only takes one serious incident to become a high profile example of CCTV management failings, possibly allowing someone to literally get away with murder.

CCTV is a powerful and potentially intimidating tool, so it is also important that CCTV use is proportionate to the potential threats at each specific site. Last year, the Information Commissioner's Office waded into the excessive use of CCTV in schools for minor obedience issues, stressing the importance of using CCTV to address a pressing need, “for example, if there is an ongoing problem of assaults or criminal damage.”

Over the last ten years since the Data Protection Act (DPA) was extended to cover human images, our CCTV consultants and assessors have seen many instances where schools trip up on the management of CCTV systems. They are not alone. Research shows over 90% of CCTV systems in the UK are not strictly complying with regulations, often due to relatively minor infringements, such as inadequate signage. The police report that around 80% of CCTV footage is not fit for purpose (i.e. is too poor to be used as evidence). The failings are behind the need for ‘proper regulation’.

What that will mean in detail is not yet clear, but CCTV regulation will probably go through a period of change and will certainly be enforced more vigorously. The Information Commissioner's Office recently got stiff new fining powers: up to £500,000 for breaches of the DPA, plus the appointment of a dedicated CCTV regulator demonstrates a serious commitment to CCTV regulation enforcement.

CCTV regulation also needs to catch up with recent changes to the digital revolution. It is very easy for buyers to be fooled by crystal clear footage on the real-time monitor, only to discover corners have been cut when it comes to the amount of data storage. Video files are very large, so the saved images on cheaper recorders are so compressed, it is not possible to make out or retrieve the original detail. That means the CCTV images will be useless as evidence in court.

Digital images are very easy to alter and copy, which means management procedures that worked for VHS video tapes needs to be tightened up to create audit trails that prove an unbroken chain of evidence custody.



Regulations apart, the quality of CCTV management is particularly important in schools, where violent ex-partners may be searching out estranged children, or worse. There are well-publicised cases of paedophile rings collecting and swapping photographs of children and targeting the subjects.

Our video forensics team accidentally stumbled on a serious school CCTV DPA breach when we needed an obsolete digital recorder to convert and edit CCTV images. As there were no new machines available, we secured a suitable recorder on eBay. We were shocked to discover the hard drive was full of children's images, it had obviously come from a school.

CCTV management is complex and the above is an outline of some of the basic confusion and omissions we often encounter when assessing school CCTV systems. If you have any lingering doubts there are a number of specialist consultants in this field, just Google “CCTV regulations” to find one.

The writer is Brian Larkins, a CCTV compliance specialist and joint managing director of VMS (CCTV) Ltd and VeriFi CCTV, the CCTV compliance & video forensic specialist.

Tel: 01425 656318 www.verifi-cctv.com

