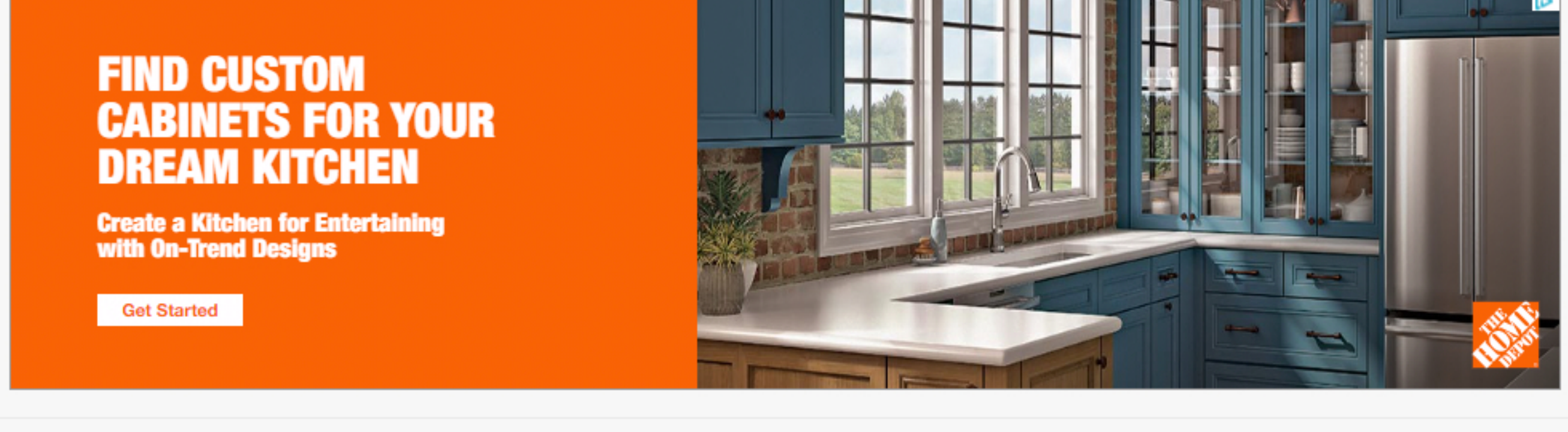


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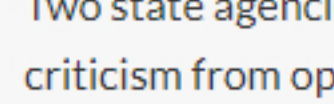
Facial recognition technology may soon come to LI schools. Will it keep students safe or invade their privacy?



Michael Lantier, assistant vice president and deputy market director of education at H2M architects + engineers in Melville, says some Long Island schools leaders have asked about the capabilities of facial recognition technology. He is shown in his office on Wednesday. Credit: Rick Kopstein

By Joie Tyrrell
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Two state agencies are looking into the use of facial recognition technology in schools, an idea that has drawn criticism from opponents who say it invades privacy, while proponents pitch it as a useful tool to help keep students safe.

The Education Department and Office of Information Technology Services have been accepting public input on the use of "biometric identifying technology" — where physical characteristics that include facial recognition and fingerprints — can be used in schools via surveillance cameras.

Office of Information Technology Services officials have been gathering feedback from teachers, school administrators and parents, along with individuals with expertise in school safety, data privacy, civil liberties and civil rights, for more than a year. The agency said a report on their findings should be available in the coming months.

No decisions on the possible use of such technology may be made until the state study is completed. Comments for the report closed at the end of October.

WHAT TO KNOW

- Two state agencies are studying the use of facial recognition technology in schools.
- A moratorium bars school districts across New York from using the technology, and the state-ordered study on the issue must be completed before any decisions are made.
- The Office of Information Technology Services has been collecting information on the issue and a report should be available in coming months.

"The Department is aware that schools may not purchase or utilize biometric identifying technology, including but not limited to facial recognition technology, in schools until the completion of a study by the Office of Information Technology Services. Stakeholder input has been obtained and is being analyzed for the study," the state Education Department said in a statement.

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The use of facial and object-recognition technology in school buildings came under scrutiny in 2020 when the Lockport City school district in western New York used them in security cameras. Then-Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo signed a law imposing a moratorium on the system while the state agencies studied its impact.

The technology has been used or considered in school systems elsewhere in the country, including in Oklahoma, West Virginia and Kansas, according to news reports. Facial recognition technology can identify or confirm a person's identity using their face via security cameras. That identity can be matched against a database of stored images.

Safety tool or invasion?

At a public hearing held by the Office of Information Technology Services in October, proponents said the technology is a safety tool. Opponents said the harm would outweigh the benefits of biometrics, especially facial recognition in a school setting.

Jake Parker, representing the Maryland-based Security Industry Association, testified there's a lot of misunderstanding about the way biometrics works.

"These are not for tracking students," he said. "It is for helping security staff screen visitors against a list of persons prohibited from entering school property."

But Juan Miguel, program associate with the New York Civil Liberties Union, said in the public hearing that the technology unfairly targeted women and people of color, and invaded student privacy. The NYCLU has raised objections to the technology, noting concerns, too, about the security of stored student data.

"Once an individual's photo is uploaded to a school facial recognition system, the system will track the person's movements around the school and with whom they've interacted," Miguel said. "These systems infringe on the privacy rights to students, parents and staff."

On Long Island, leaders of the superintendents' groups in both Nassau and Suffolk counties declined to comment on the issue, saying in a statement that they were unaware of such technology being used in Island schools.

The state Education Department said superintendents applying for funding for security cameras under the Smart Schools Bond Act must agree to not purchase facial recognition software. The Smart Schools Bond Act allocated \$2 billion statewide for schools to purchase and upgrade classroom technology, school connectivity and high-tech security. Plans must be submitted and approved by the state.

"It is important to note that while some of the identified plans have descriptions that include words such as or similar to 'analytics' pertaining to the cameras themselves, this does not mean that the cameras are utilizing facial recognition and/or that the district requested any software capable of such functions," the state Education Department said in a statement.

Superintendents must confirm in writing that their district will not use facial recognition software or risk losing their certification.

In Locust Valley, more than \$368,000 has been allocated for the installation of security cameras at the district's five elementary schools, the administration building and the bus/maintenance garage, according to the district's plan submitted to the state. And though the security cameras are capable of employing facial recognition, Superintendent Kenneth Graham said in a statement "that software component is not active in our system and the district does not use facial recognition as part of our school security protocols.

"The Smart Schools Investment Plan was presented to the community and approved by the Board of Education in the spring of 2022. The district subsequently submitted and received approval from the State Education Department to complete these comprehensive upgrades," Graham added in the statement.

Local districts have spent tens of millions in recent years in response to nationwide school shootings for campus security, including hardening entryways, installing panic buttons and adding surveillance cameras throughout grounds and buildings.

Breakthrough technology?

Michael Lantier, assistant vice president and deputy market director of education at H2M architects + engineers in Melville, has worked with nearly 40 districts on Long Island on construction projects, including those that strengthen school security.

Lantier said some school leaders had asked about the capabilities of facial recognition. Questions asked included: "Where do you see this technology going? What are the possibilities?"

"It could be a breakthrough technology ... For schools, the benefit it is to make sure only authorized people enter into a building," he said.

Lantier said the system also could be used to flag the identity of someone banned from campus, and if that person arrived on-site — school security personnel could act quickly.

Jay Worona, deputy executive director and general counsel for the New York State School Boards Association, said he expects districts to be interested in what the report finds.

"A really important aspect of this is how do we balance privacy with the ability to utilize technologies the best possible way to protect the safety of students and staff?" Worona said. "That's why it's paramount that we study this, because when we have technology that could yield the greatest degree of protection possible — we need to at least ask the questions as to how that could be utilized and not at the same time violate people's privacy."



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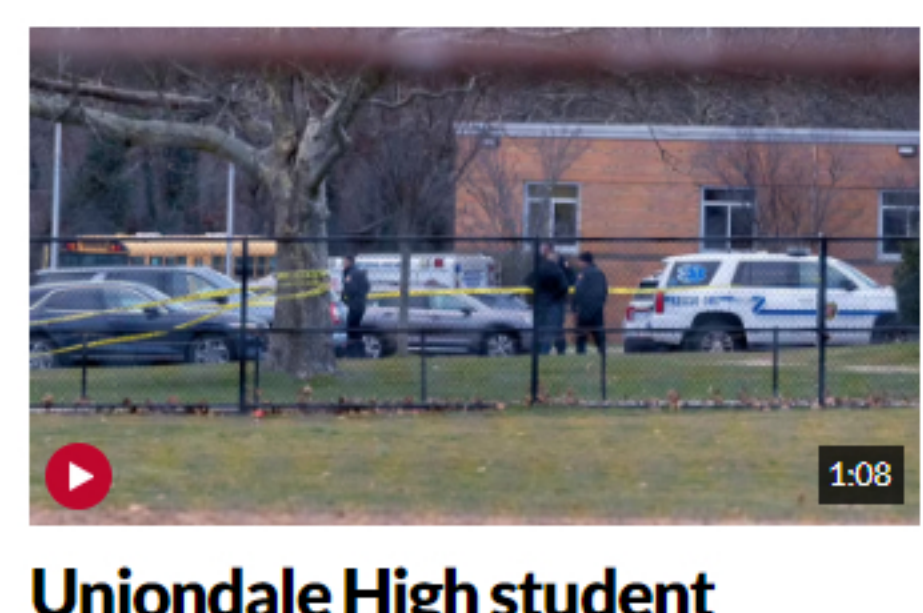
Joie Tyrrell is a Long Island native and covers education for Newsday, where she has worked since 1998.

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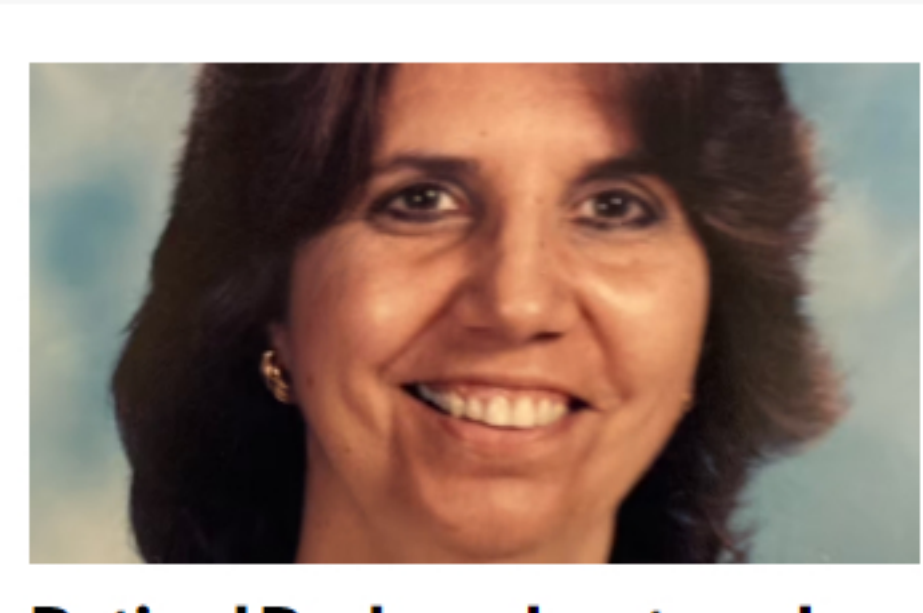
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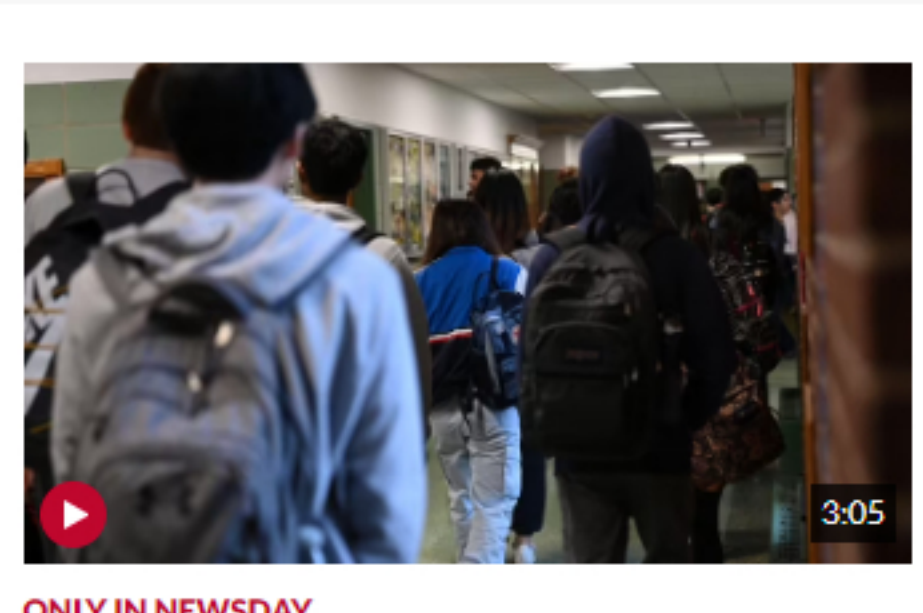
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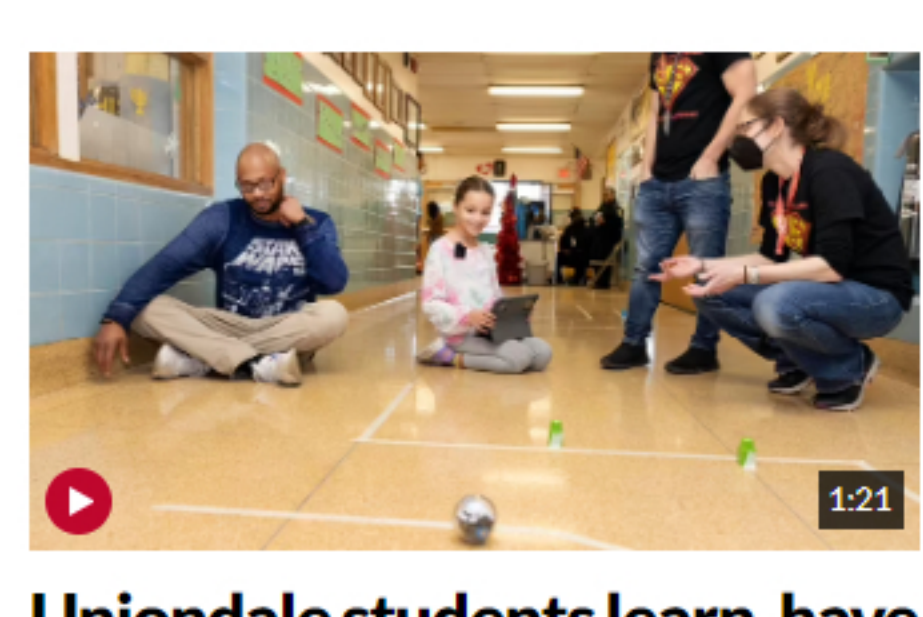
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