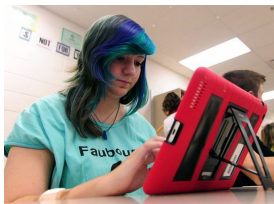


Thieves swipe school-issued iPads

Brett M. Kelman, USA TODAY 12:46 p.m. EST November 4, 2013

As tablets and laptops land in young hands, thieves are targeting schools and students.



(Photo: Scott Roberson, The Daily Journal, via AP)

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For two years, the parent-teacher association at River Glen School in San Jose, Calif., scraped together donated dollars and grant money to buy technology for every classroom, hoping to close the gap between rich and poor students. Then, in one night, burglars walked away with half of what they had worked for.

"We had come so far," said Michele Bertolone, who leads the parent fundraising committee and is the parent of a fourth-grader. "The community was excited ... and the students were getting in a groove."

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Last weekend, someone took two lockable security carts from the computer lab, police said. One held 30 laptops. The other held 30 iPads. Nothing has been recovered.

Such break-ins are becoming an issue at the small but growing number of schools across the USA that are bringing more technology into the classrooms. Most victimized schools have been like Agua Caliente Elementary in Cathedral City, Calif., which lost a few tablets before security forced burglars to flee. Others, like John B. Drake Elementary School in Chicago, have lost hundreds of iPads in a single break-in.

Sometimes the burglars are caught, but that doesn't guarantee that the loot is recovered. In May, more than 80 iPads were stolen from the library in Mansfield High School in Louisiana. After tablet-tracking programs failed, local police used DNA evidence — blood found on a broken window — to catch a suspect Tuesday. But the search for the tablets continues, said Mansfield Police Chief Gary Hobbs.

"Teachers and administrators are so excited about the tech that it's very easy to overlook the security implications until it's too late," said Ken Trump, a school safety expert in Cleveland who has consulted with campuses in every state. "It's not just an issue of protecting the devices in the school itself. It's also an issue, even more importantly, of protecting the children coming to and from school."

As districts across the country begin to catch on to this tech trend — Los Angeles Unified, the second-largest school district in the nation, plans to provide iPads for all 640,000 students by 2014 — safety experts say the vulnerability must be addressed.

Although only a few ambitious districts — including the Coachella Valley Unified School District in California and the McAllen Independent School District in Texas — are issuing iPads to every student, many districts are piloting tablets or similar devices in a few classrooms, grades or schools.

Although many districts have invested in security carts — steel vaults that can be rolled between classrooms — not all schools have gone to the same length to protect technology in student hands. Many districts allow students to take home school-issued devices, creating an opportunity for thieves. Generally, it is big news when a school issues tablets to students; that coverage alerts criminals, who sometimes target students for their tablets, especially when school uniforms make them easy to identify.

"The first step needs to be having a candid conversation with the user — the student — who has a great deal of naiveté," Trump said. "Most kids don't think that if they whip out an iPad on the walk home, they may have made themselves a target to anybody on that street corner."

That's exactly what happened in the Cleveland Heights-University Heights School District, which serves about 6,000 students in northeastern Ohio. The district issued 1,300 iPads to its middle school students last fall.

At first, the tablets were a triumph for the district, "shouted from the rooftops" in celebration, said district spokeswoman Angee Shaker. Nobody considered this might attract robbers, who saw middle school students as easy targets.

Less than a week after the tablets were handed out, more than a dozen students had been mugged on the way home from school. The thieves had learned to deactivate a tracking software on the tablets, so they stole iPads exclusively, Shaker said.

"The students were preyed upon. They were absolutely targeted," Shaker said. "It took us by surprise, but now we know."

Less than a month after introducing the iPads, the Ohio school district stopped letting students take them home. The district has remained this way for a year. Students still use their devices in class every day, but they can't use them at home, which was half the point of issuing the iPads in the first place.

Since the muggings in Cleveland Heights, other school districts have learned to harden security so students can take their tablets home without fear, said Darryl Adams, superintendent of the Coachella Valley Unified, a rural school district in the deserts of southern California.

This year, Coachella Valley Unified will issue an iPad to each of its 19,000 students.

These new tablets are equipped with a security system that can only be removed by Apple itself, Adams said. These tablets will shut down unless they "check in" with the school district network every time they connect to the Internet.

"So if these iPads are lost or stolen, they become a paperweight basically," Adams said.

Kelman also reports for The (Palm Springs, Calif.) Desert Sun

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