Is it inevitable that someday soon every classroom in every school will be VIDEOTAPED? That sounds crazy, but here's how some districts are benefitting from video.

BIG BROTHER or BIG SAVIOR?

GARY SHATTUCK THOUGHT HE KNEW A bad idea when he heard one. In 2011, Shattuck, the director of technology and media services for Newton County Schools in Covington, Georgia, put microphones on some of his teachers to see if amplifying their voices improved instruction. It did, and it created a bigger impact than he or his colleagues had ever imagined. But when a partner of the 23-school district suggested Newton raise the bar on its experiment by adding video cameras to classrooms, Shattuck's first reaction was "No way"—teacher concerns ranged from privacy and vanity issues to worries about being disciplined for every misstep.

With less than a month left in the school year, Shattuck agreed to a small pilot. The results surprised him. Teachers—who had been given total control over what to record and whom to share the videos with—were amazed by the differences in their classes, mentioning specifically how discipline changed for the positive.

The next year, the district put cameras in 20 high school rooms. "We found that students in those classrooms were behaving in a totally different manner than ones across the hall," says Melissa Jackson, the district's instructional technology coordinator. "It wasn't just that negative behavior diminished; positive behavior increased. It changed the culture of the classroom."

If not everyone was on board after these findings, one incident clinched their support: For a special presentation, a Newton teacher taped her class and put the video online for students to view; she gave them a related assignment to complete by the following day. When the next class started, a student who had been absent the day before showed up with the assignment done.

BY WAYNE D'ORIO

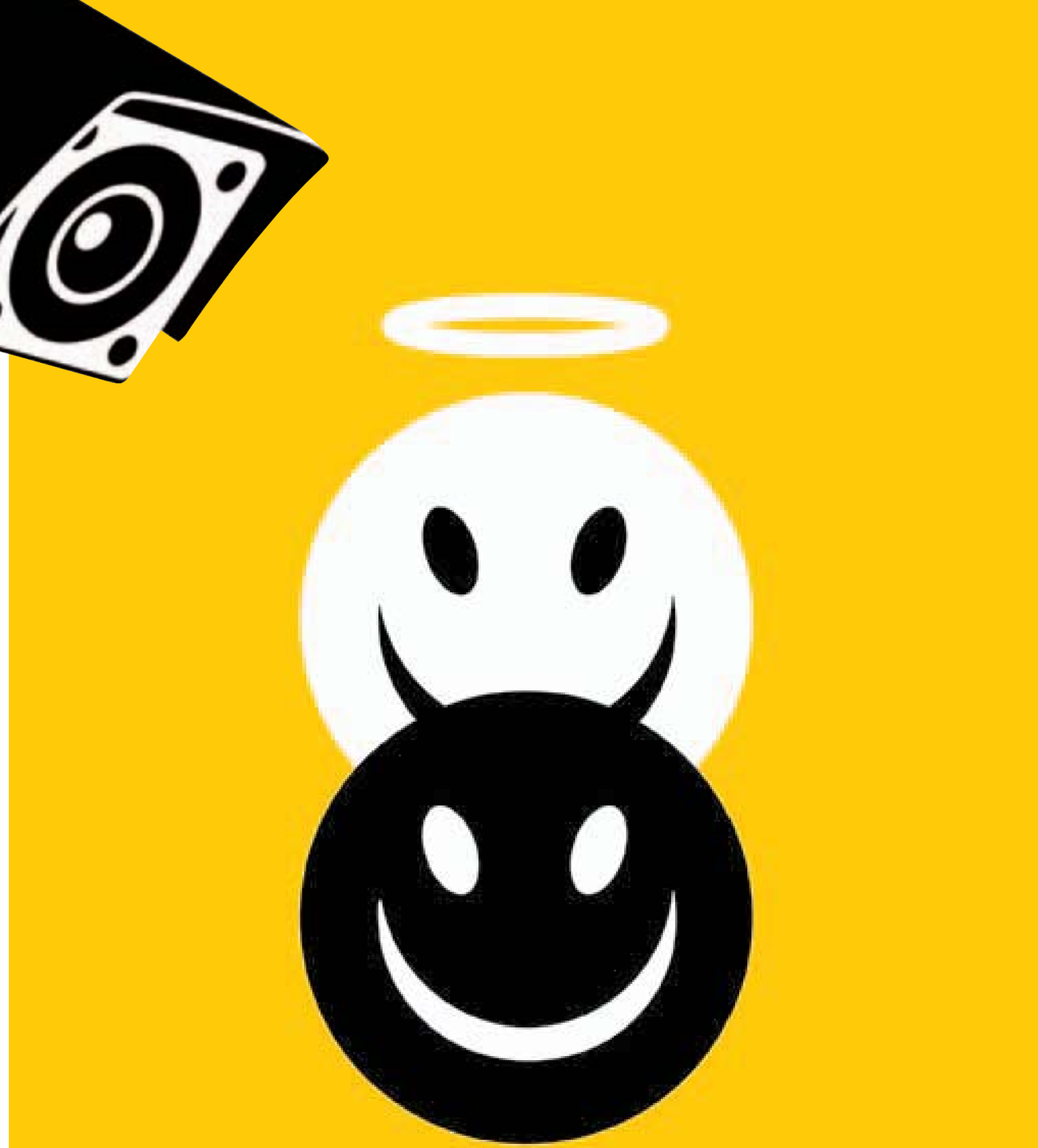

ILLUSTRATION: NOMA BAR

He had watched the lesson online and completed the assignment along with his peers.

The teacher was thrilled. The student then asked a question that still reverberates around the district. "Do I have to be counted as absent for yesterday?"

"It's changed the way we're looking at seat time," Jackson says.

VIDEO IS READY FOR ITS CLOSE-UP

THE IDEA OF VIDEO IN SCHOOLS IS nothing new. Look outside your building and chances are you'll see security cameras at your entrances and maybe in your hallways. A growing number of schools have been using video for years to improve teaching as well. So why does it seem like video is just now getting ready for prime time?

Several reasons. First, nearly everyone is carrying a video camera in her or his pocket. Sure, smartphones won't give you the best-quality video, but they can capture short snippets of work. Even professional cameras are getting better at classroom coverage and are costing less. Storage is cheaper, with many districts using the cloud to hold large amounts of video backup.

But the biggest reason might be the simplest one. "Video doesn't lie; it erases all perceptions," says Abbey Duggins, assistant principal for instruction at South Carolina's Saluda High School. Saluda tapes each teacher twice a year, using everything from iPhones to iPads to Chromebooks. "We see so much immediate change and growth" that the district hopes to expand video's use, Duggins says. "Filming best practices is better than talking about them."

"There is an increase in the amount of video in schools," says AASA executive director Dan Domenech. The fact that teachers are asking to be videotaped, as they're doing in both Newton and Saluda, would not have occurred in the past, he notes. But the proliferation of cameras in everyday life, and the ubiquity of available technology already in classrooms, has made this choice more palatable for many.

School technology expert Scott McLeod says that, in some ways, videos can lessen the pervasive ongoing tension between teachers and administrators, especially when it comes to assessments. "Video can be an objective third element," he notes.

The key for any system is how a district goes about setting it up, says McLeod, a prominent blogger and the director of innovation for the Prairie Lakes Area Education Agency in Iowa. Allowing teachers to draft rules and control who sees their classroom videos puts them in charge of the technology, instead of the other way around.

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—Abbey Duggins, Saluda High School (NC)

TEACHERS IN CHARGE AT NEWTON

CREATING A SYSTEM AS SOPHISTICATED as Newton's takes much more work than opening an app and catching a few minutes of random instruction. "We never told anybody it was easy," Jackson says. "There have been a lot of hurdles."

Each classroom setup costs about $3,400, says Jeff Anderson, CEO of Audio Enhancement, and the person who initially suggested that Shattuck add classroom video cameras. When existing cameras didn't cover the classroom adequately, Audio Enhancement created one that would, the EduCam360. It's about the size of a smoke detector and it offers viewers three different angles of the room, as well as the ability to zoom in on chosen sections of the classroom. It syncs with the company's audio microphones.

The setup required a lot of internal work, including network drops in ceilings to various switches, says Craig Dinn, a network engineer for the district. Much of the money to pay for this work came from a sales tax initiative, he explains.

Because teachers retain total control over taping, how the system is used varies from classroom to classroom. Teachers can choose to tape every class on a daily basis, which more and more of them are doing. They can keep their videos private, let their principal and colleagues view them, or share the videos with students online. They also have the opportunity to learn while being coached by more experienced instructors. Teachers can selectively tape classes, and they can turn on the recorder in an emergency situation by pressing a button on their microphone. (Triggering the emergency mode does take the teacher privacy option away, as the video can be viewed by administrators and emergency responders.)

Newton, which is currently set up to tape in 500 middle and high school classes, proceeded slowly to reassure teachers that they were still in control. While some principals were put off by not having access to the videos immediately, Jackson says, teachers learned that their control was real.

"We had to prove it to them," says Dinn. "We saw an increase [in usage] when teachers realized that only they had access."

At Newton, video gets automatically uploaded to a 40-terrabyte storage system using SAFARI Montage. Teachers can save a lesson, or even edit a snippet to use in professional learning communities. If video isn't touched in 30 days, it is erased. Dinn says the district maintains a large sort system to help keep track of the many videos. In March 2015, teachers shared more than 22,000 recordings with administrators and students. Teachers can also authorize supervisors to watch their classes live, although most don't do that, Jackson says.

The district even got an exemption from the state to have a teacher assessment via video. That's when the project became a lot more valuable. Teachers can turn in a 30-minute clip for the assessment, Jackson says, and "I found teachers who I thought were rock stars rerecording lessons." They were fixing issues, making improvements four to five times before turning their videos in, she adds. Teachers now strive to put their best work forward, and they improve their teaching in the process.

Some of the security benefits remain the most dramatic. In one classroom, a teacher had to leave the room. Administrators were watching the class live (with the teacher's permission), and noticed a student using his cellphone. They called to the classroom next door and had that teacher go in and confiscate the student's phone. When the teacher left, all the students in the room looked up at the camera, Jackson says.

In another instance, a pregnant student had her phone confiscated by a teacher. Later that day, she complained to her mother that she had been physically pushed by the teacher and that her unborn child may have been harmed in the process. When the student, her parent, and a lawyer showed up at the school the next day, officials were alarmed. The teacher wasn't, because he knew the video would exonerate him, which it did.

The only thing Newton doesn't have is documented proof that the system has improved academic results. The district is in the middle of a three-year study, but testing changes are making it hard to compare results, Jackson says. What they do know is that in classrooms which received cameras in 2014, there was a 40 percent decrease in office discipline referrals from the previous year, when the cameras weren't there.

REFLECTION IN SALUDA COUNTY

SALUDA USES VIDEO TO IMPROVE ITS teachers' practices by highlighting strengths and weaknesses but also to show exemplary lessons and master strategies. Administrators made a clear decision not to use video for evaluation.

"Our hope is that teachers will reflect," says Shawn Clark, the district's director of curriculum and instruction, "that they'll see what works and what doesn't. That doesn't always happen naturally." The district uses its professional learning partner, Teachscape, to provide reflection guides teachers can reference when watching themselves.

Administrators started slowly, soliciting volunteers and using video to help improve inclusion classes. They knew their system was working when the district's teacher of the year made a major discovery.

This teacher was very good, says Clark. But she was awful with her wait time, not allowing students a moment to answer her questions before she started talking again. Although this had been pointed out to her, when she saw herself on video, "she literally gasped in horror." Taking the lesson to heart, she not only changed her style immediately, but she also allowed the district to use her video to help other teachers. "That opened doors for us," says Duggins, Saluda High's assistant principal. The school saw immediate returns academically for its special education students and has since seen the whole district improve on the state grading system, from "below average" in 2008 to "good" in 2012.

AFTER SEEING HER VIDEO, ONE TEACHER CHANGED HER STYLE—SHE EVEN ALLOWED THE DISTRICT TO USE IT TO HELP OTHER TEACHERS.

STUDENT PRIVACY ISSUES

ALTHOUGH THERE'S SKEPTICISM ABOUT how students would feel if videotaping became the norm, Newton officials offer surprising evidence to the contrary. "We immediately assumed there would be concerns," Jackson says. "The only thing we've gotten from students is: 'We want to see ourselves more often.' They love it."

Technology expert Scott McLeod says that with video cameras documenting everything in society—from traffic violations to domestic abuse by sports stars—students probably don't have an expectation of privacy when they are in school. But "what happens to the right of privacy over time as these [cameras] become cheaper and more relevant? Is a student going to be willing to divulge something to a teacher if a camera is on?"

Jay Stanley of the ACLU was even blunter: "I'm deeply skeptical of standing cameras in the classroom. We're raising a generation of children to be acclimated to constant surveillance." But he admitted that Newton's policy of giving teachers the power to decide whether to share video—and letting students block footage of themselves from being shared online—was a good step that quelled many of his concerns.

For Jackson, who started out as a teacher when the program launched, all the proof she needed about the value of video in schools happened under her own roof. When her son, a C student throughout high school, finally came home with a report card full of A's and B's, she asked him what had changed.

"We never know when they are recording, Mom," he told her, explaining that he was forced to pay better attention in all of his classes.

Jackson says her son has since graduated from high school and is in an electrical apprentice program, where he attends classes while he practices the trade. "I love this because it reinforces what we are doing with our teachers," she says. ■