Tracking truants

Students wagging school can now be tracked with a new app. By Aileen Macalintal

Parents and schools can now use GPS to locate truant students via their smartphones. The app uses GPS to display the child's location on a dynamic Google Map. The parent can also use Google's Street View feature to see the student's location in 360-degree street level imagery.

Mark Fortunatow, CEO of MGM Wireless, said more than 1000 schools nationwide currently use an MGM SMS solution for attendance management.

As of June 3, more than 900,000 parents can download the free app for Apple and android gadgets.

"MGM Pinpoint is a complete solution that helps schools manage the critical and complex area of student attendance management," said Fortunatow.

Once a student is absent without an explanation, the school management system will take note of this and will initiate an automatic process. An SMS text message about the student's unexplained absence is sent to each parent's phone.

When the parent enters a PIN and clicks the link in the SMS message, it connects to the MGM Pinpoint app, which should be installed by a parent.

The software will only report tracking information from the time students leave for school in the morning until they are expected home in the afternoon.

"We have involved school principals in the development of all our innovations for school attendance management using SMS and mobile devices. This includes our customers in education departments, public schools and independent denominational and non-denominational schools," said Fortunatow.

He said the schools who attended the app's launch at Methodist Ladies College in Sydney in April were highly receptive.

"Their feedback is that it's a tool that takes attendance management to a whole new level. It meets the expectations of parents in a technological age where there is high prevalence of news stories about missing children, and therefore a higher perceived risk," he said.

He also reported that independent of MGM Wireless, Flinders University

professors and students have analysed the ways in which MGM Pinpoint has the potential to completely change the education sector's approach to attendance management.

"Like any technical solutions, there are positives and negatives," said Rob Livingstone, a fellow at the University of Technology at Sydney.

Livingstone said there is no risk of access to private information relating to individual students. However, data storage could be a technical risk in terms of how the information is secured.

"You only need to look at some of the major security breaches from some of the well-known systems and applications," he said, "Wherever you have information sitting on a database there could be intentional or unintentional release of information," citing deliberate attacks from a cybercriminal or organisation as an example.

Another concern he raised is the effectiveness of the app. "At the heart of it, I'm not sure how a phone would actually be seen as a fool-proof way of getting around the truancy issue because the kids could switch the phone off."

Livingstone went on to say that a number of schools have rules about switching off phones to avoid distracting students from study.

He said, "If a child does deliberately wish to be a truant they just need to leave the phone on their locker or hand their phones to a friend while they can be truant, and do whatever they want to do, which paradoxically could increase the risk, should something happen to the child who is now without a phone who is not able to make an emergency phone call."

Trust is one of the broader issues, he said. When Livingstone asked his daughter how she would feel about the app, she told him she would have seen it as showing a complete lack of trust.

Commenting on the privacy issues surrounding not only Pinpoint but other such technologies, he said it is very common for IT providers to state privacy policies upfront.

Providers are also cautious about security privacy, saying they do not sell information.

However, Livingstone said, "The very last thing on their customer privacy policies is they are subject to change at any time, and we encourage visitors to visit and review the site regularly for any changes." ■

Keeping it private

"MGM Wireless upholds the highest standards of student privacy, safety and welfare measures," said the company. Here, they offer some useful information:

1. MGM Pinpoint links are generated only if the student is missing without an explanation given to the school and only if an Absence SMS is sent
2. Absence SMS texts are only sent to the nominated primary parent contact
3. Parents use a unique, secure PIN code to gain access to the location
4. The location link is unique – it is only available for the day of issue and only during school hours, e.g., from the time the student leaves home to the time they may arrive back after co-curricular activities