

STUDENTS, OFFICIALS AGREE:

On-Bus Cameras Make A Difference

BY SUSAN USHER

How would you behave if you knew a hidden video camera might be recording your every word and action?

"Better," says George Brown, director of transportation for the Brunswick County Schools. "Our kids are 50 percent better behaved this year than last year."

Cameras are making the difference, with the county's schools reporting fewer behavior problems on buses and reduced vandalism.

A safety grant received by the school system last year helped provide funds to purchase three miniature video cameras and 136 mounting boxes—one per county school bus. The video cameras are not assigned to particular units, but are moved from school to school and bus to bus as needed, "wherever we have a problem," says Brown.

"If we told drivers or the school what buses they're on, it would defeat the purpose."

"We're trying to make it as comfortable as possible for everyone. We're not trying to trap anybody," says Brown. "We're trying to cut down on vandalism and make the buses a little more pleasant for everybody."

Information from the film helps staff maintain student discipline, identify areas in which students need interpersonal skills training, and help drivers improve their student management skills.

Usually rotated at random, the cameras are assigned to trouble



ON BUS NO. 132 (above) and 135 other buses countywide, the possibility of a camera catching them in the act is helping keep a check on students' school bus behavior, but doesn't daunt the most recalcitrant.

spots as needed. A garage mechanic may notice vandalism or evidence of other problems when they service a bus. A school may request a camera on a particular bus, usually after a driver submits a conduct form. Parents also call Brown's office to report problems on their child's bus.

"Then we'll honor a specific request, but we won't tell them what day," says Brown.

All the driver and passengers see is the fixed-position "black box" mounted high at the front of the bus.

When the driver starts the bus, a red light comes on indicating the camera is in operation—even if the camera isn't in the box that particular day.

Not all students are convinced a camera is or ever will be inside the box on their bus, says Germael Brown, but most aren't willing to take the gamble.

Henry Randolph, who drives Bus No. 132 for Shallotte Middle School, says that having the camera box on board "makes a marked difference" in students' behavior, at least those who otherwise think they could get away with something. Cutting the number of potential troublemakers helps him focus on his main responsibility—watching the road and getting his passengers to and from school safely.

"They'll be jumping over the seats and stuff, but when he gets on the bus and cuts on the camera they settle down," says rider Nicole Cobb.

Randolph's route winds through the Shallotte Point community, with ridership of 40 to 45 students in the morning and an afternoon load approaching the 60-passenger capacity. This is Randolph's sixth year driving and his fourth for the middle school, where he also works as a teacher assistant.

His tone with students is calm and

friendly, but commands respect. A student whose assigned seat was occupied by a visitor one recent morning asked first before taking another seat. "They know I'm particular about where they sit," their driver said.

Most students on Bus No. 132 behave most of the time, says Randolph, but not every one contains their pent-up energy and excitement. "You can tell when it's Monday and when it's Friday," he says. Students are at their loudest, and often their rowdiest, on the eve of a holiday break and on the way home from Wednesday half-days.

Randolph appreciates the on-board camera, but agrees with Cobb's assessment that "some of them still act bad."

"The flagrant violators just don't care," says Randolph. "They're not going to behave, even if their parents were riding the bus every day."

In his first year at Shallotte Middle, Assistant Principal Robert Grimes can't compare this school term to last, but is pleased with results of the on-bus camera program so far.

"We're having good success with it," he says. "It's amazing they are as well behaved as they are."

On some buses where youngsters



DRIVER HENRY RANDOLPH shuts out most noise, relying mainly on his wide-angle mirror to monitor student behavior. The camera is above his head on the right.

have doubted a camera exists, Grimes said showing students still shots from the video has been effective in changing their minds. "It gets everything," he says.

Film from the three cameras is viewed daily by Brown and/or one or two other staff members, then segments or clips are shared with appropriate personnel and with parents. "We don't show parents the entire film, just the part involving their child," said Brown.

"A lot of days when I get here before 6 a.m. I can run through a couple of hours of film before the telephone starts ringing and the staff comes in. It's extra work, but it's worth it. It's saving us some work and some money. It's been very successful."

Last year, before the cameras were installed, it cost Brunswick County Schools \$7,000 to repair or replace cut seat covers. "We'd have students to sit there and whittle on a seat or take a pencil and jab it," said Brown.

Brown likens the cameras to having a security guard on board, a neutral third party that tells not just one, but all sides of a story.

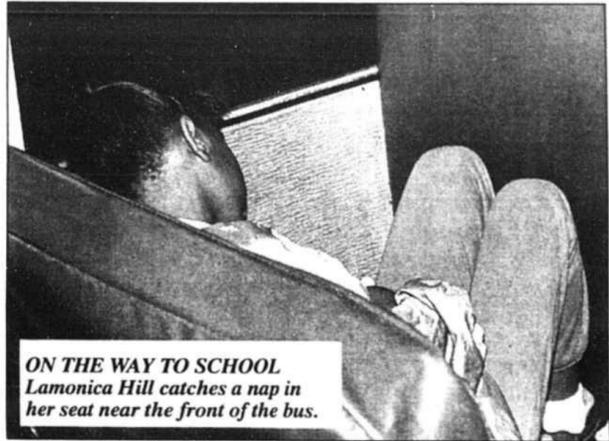
That's something most students find reassuring.

"Having the camera makes me feel better," says fifth grader Jennifer Mooney on Bus No. 132.

"You know that if they view the film they'll know what was going on and who did it."

In some school systems using the on-bus cameras, drivers have complained, aware that the camera not only catches their riders "in the act" of disobeying, but can also record any problems a driver might be having with appropriate language or student management. But Brunswick County drivers appear to appreciate the cameras' help.

"We've not had a single driver to complain, at least not yet," says Brown.



ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL Lamonica Hill catches a nap in her seat near the front of the bus.

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