

Falls City schools decline additional social media moderation

By Jolene Guzman
The Itemizer-Observer

FALLS CITY — The Falls City School District decided to pass on implementing a program to “data mine” and monitor social media activity within its boundaries or about its schools.

Called “location-based social media monitoring,” the service uses software available through several companies to collect social media posts containing key words designated by

the school district or agency.

Falls City Superintendent Jack Thompson said examples include searching for the words “gun” or “suicide” and “Falls City High School.”

“We would be able to see what’s going on, what’s being posted on Facebook and all these kinds of things,” he said.

Thompson said, at first glance, it seems like a useful tool for early intervention in possible school violence or

for students contemplating harming themselves.

“The issue with it is you have to monitor it,” he said. “If you choose to use it, you have to monitor it, which means we have to an employee monitor all of the Facebook posts and everything else that this thing data mines.”

An assessment by lawyers for the Willamette Education Service District, to which the district belongs, said districts that use the software could put themselves at

legal risk.

Paul A. Dakopolos, of Garrett Hemann Robertson, which represents the WESD, wrote in his analysis of using the program that there is nothing illegal about collecting information posted on social media because Oregon courts have found users “don’t have a reasonable expectation of privacy in the information that they post publicly.”

“On the other hand, if a district makes the choice to use a service ... then fails to

take appropriate action on a known threat to a school ... there may be liability of the district’s failure to act,” Dakopolos wrote.

School officials believe there is a less-intrusive way to gather the same information: Maintaining close relationships with students and parents.

Jami Kidd, Falls City School Board chairwoman, said Falls City is a close-knit community where school employees know and take an interest in students.

She added someone probably already knows a student is struggling before they would post it to social media.

Thompson had another concern about the use of the software.

“For me, I look at this and I’m not ready for school districts to be big brother. I’m really not,” he said. “Police agencies have been using information like this for years. In my personal opinion, this is not an area that schools need to get into.”

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