Kids ID card crosses a line

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“The Hunger Games." "The Giver." "Divergent."

When my college students discuss dystopian books and movies that paint a totalitarian future, they seem resigned to it.

Individuality and privacy will disappear. They'll be scanned like a barcode, tracked, categorized and penalized for violating government strictures created in the name of communal safety.

And it's no wonder. It's starting here and now.

This autumn, Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) issued students ID cards that reveal their photo, name, graduation year and a bar code. Kindergartners through 12th-graders wear them on lanyards around their necks most of the school day. As a letter to parents made clear: This is not an optional program.

The idea: Make sure students, not strangers, gain access to schools: "We're trying to keep our schools as safe and secure as possible," noted BCPS's security director Dale Rauenzahn.

Safety. Who doesn't want that? School shootings are nothing new, but efforts to prevent such tragedies also lead to "moral panics," in which a perceived threat triggers misguided policies. It's a rush "to do something," despite the fallout. (Most shooters are teens already enrolled at the school or males between 20 and 40 years old, studies show. Not unidentified kindergartners).

ID lanyards have sparked lawsuits over a child's strangulation, as well as civil liberty controversies: Some cards carry radio-frequency identification (RFID) chips used to track cattle.

Soon, the county's 110,000 students could scan so-called One Cards into schools and classrooms by tapping the card against kiosks, similar to mobile wallet-style technology. Though not quite RFID, the system would let administrators track students' whereabouts by where they tapped. It's unclear how the program would be implemented.

In Orwellian fashion, the kiosks can generate audio alerts for students with "attendance or discipline issues," according to the website of ScholarChip, the company BCPS hired to provide the chip cards and related cloud-based data storage system.

Using cards to access locked front doors seems logical, though unwieldy. Student IDs, on hand or in pockets, serve a purpose. Such cards — with euphemistic monikers like Zpass — are used in Cincinnati and a few other locales to track school bus ridership and library book check-outs, concepts being pursued here. Money is also at stake: Cards might better track student attendance, which brings schools millions in state funding.

But such programs raise privacy concerns. "What kind of lesson does it teach our children if they're chipped like cattle and their every movement tracked?" posed Jay Stanley, a senior ACLU policy analyst in Washington, D.C. "It doesn't create the kind of independent, autonomous people we want in our democratic society."

Last year, schools in San Antonio, Texas, dropped ID tracking programs following a lawsuit; the student who filed refused to wear a chip-embedded card and was expelled. Citing religious grounds, her father compared the badges to the Biblical "mark of the beast." It doesn't get more apocalyptic than Revelations.

The lanyards themselves also pose risks. Parents are told to keep things off their kids' necks. (Students remove lanyards during gym, for safety. Yet hallway and bus chaos poses risk.) In September, a $15-million lawsuit was filed in Canada after an 8-year-old boy in Calgary was choked when his lanyard got hung up on a bathroom stall. The child suffered severe brain injuries.

BCPS-issued lanyards have a "break-away" feature in the back (though multiple break-away points are recommended). Yet students are encouraged to personalize the experience via designer lanyards, without warnings to buy break-away versions. Clips for IDs would be safer. Isn't safety the goal?

Parents are told the ID program requires our "support" — i.e. compliance. That's slippery-slope territory. The Rutherford Institute, a conservative Virginia-based civil liberties organization that joined the Texas suit, urged sensitivity, saying schools "need opt-out procedures" for privacy concerns.

I deeply appreciate the schools' focus on safety. But I worry when a 5th-grader, resigned to the badge across her chest, predicts she'll soon have a GPS-chip embedded in her brain. School security needs improvement after the Perry Hall High School shooting two years ago — logical measures such as staff training, security personnel, lock-down hallway doors, entrance video cameras and early mental health interventions.

Physically tagging our children undermines the independent thinking our schools emphasize. Ditch the lanyards and incessant kiosk-tapping and pay attention to what's actually being accomplished.

As a Carver Center student noted in a Sun letter to the editor Nov. 9, the One Card program didn't prevent a fellow student from hiding a gun in his backpack. That student, who planned to bomb the high school and shoot teachers and students, was issued the snazzy new ID — just like everyone else.