

by celia condon

THE REQUIREMENT

Students and Shawnee Mission School District (SMSD) staff members knew the year would come with many WiFi and WebEx issues, but didn't realize the bigger obstacle for students and teachers across the district: the lack of cameras being on in class.

According to Associate Principal Britton Haney, the administration wanted to make a change to meet the needs of the students and teachers. On Monday, Jan. 11, an email about a new camera requirement for the upcoming semester was sent out to the SMSD community.

"It has been hard to duplicate the true Lancer experience through a laptop, and it is even harder when students keep their cameras turned off while in Webex classroom meetings," the email from East's administration team read. "It is for these reasons that we must prioritize this component of our remote learning and so moving forward, our expectation is that cameras will be on when students are in class."

According to Haney, the main goal of the requirement is to assist students and teachers — they're hoping grades will improve and stronger student-teacher relationships can be developed.

However, the new requirement was met with mainly negative responses from students. According to a poll of 208 East students sent out via email, 3.3% of students are looking forward to the requirement, and think it's fair, while 30.7% don't mind it, and the remaining 66% believe it's unfair.

Prior to this announcement, teachers were not allowed to require students to keep their cameras on during class, although many encouraged or required it for attendance. This adjustment to remote learning has left students and parents concerned, especially those with difficult living situations that make virtual learning difficult as is.

Many teachers have expressed that they've grown tired of lecturing to classes filled with mainly gray boxes, the only reassurance that the students were present being names on the participation list and the handful who chose to leave their cameras on.

After noticing on average student grades were lower than a normal school year, SMSD decided to implement the new required cameras policy, according to Haney.

"Normally, we have about 24 pages of students with D's and F's on regular," Haney said. "We're at 45 right now. And we are fully aware there's some other factors involved with this. But we think one thing we can do as a building, is have students turn their cameras on in order to allow teachers to see if students are understanding through facial expressions."

Students and teachers are unsure of how exactly the requirement will be enforced and believe that it will become more clear and established as time goes on.

"It's really, to me, not gonna be too much different than our rights to tell you to put your phones away in our classroom," Psychology teacher Brett Kramer said. "They are similar in a literal sense, no teacher can reach through your screen and turn your camera on. They can't grab your phone from your hands without serious consequences."

SMILE! YOU'RE ON CAMERA.

After the Shawnee Mission School District released a statement requiring all students to turn on their cameras during online classes, students express concern for those in difficult home situations or with mental illness

IMPACT OF HOMELIFE

According to some students like Freeman and Lenger, the most pressing issue is the population of the school district that doesn't have an option to sit in a bedroom, office, kitchen or house of their own.

"On average, we have about 350 students per year who meet the criteria for homelessness under the federal law of McKinney-Vento," District Social Worker David Aramovich said. "This law is a wider definition than that of HUD, (Housing and Urban Development,) to include families and students who are doubled-up, meaning that they are living with other friends or families mostly due to economic hardship. Essentially, those residing in non-permanent housing."

Students like Freeman feel the new requirement doesn't tend to the population of students in the district who are homeless, have a challenging living or financial situation or are embarrassed by their workspace, as they might feel it is inferior to others in class.

In the poll of East students, 62.1% said that they perceive an embarrassment of workspace as a leading factor in kids with cameras off, and 14.7% said that they perceive homelessness as a leading factor. Kramer recognizes the issue the camera policy poses and the unlikelihood that every student will be able to have their camera on at all times.

"Even if there are no homeless people on my roster, that doesn't mean that they [students in a lower socioeconomic class] can't feel subjected to judgment from people who might be on the very high end of socioeconomic status," Kramer said.

Administrators have advised students in abnormal situations to reach out to teachers, and

let them know why they don't have their camera on during class.

"We do have families and students that couch surf and live in their vehicles — fortunately, a low percent of our total population," Aramovich said. "We deal with things on a case by case basis and adjust according to the student's needs."

The students who deal with homelessness or workspace embarrassment may be given a pardon from the requirement after reaching out to teachers. However, many see this as exploitation to those special-situation students. Freeman pointed out that it could now be assumed by peers that students who have their camera off are working through a tough living situation. Students like her want to avoid this singling out of themselves and others.

"I've had my own issues in the past with the school where I've had to get special accommodations," Freeman said. "I was so embarrassed, I didn't want people to know about it, and I felt like my teachers were looking down on me then."

Along with circumstances including homelessness and unstable living conditions, students are concerned with other responsibilities that may make upholding the camera requirement more difficult.

Lenger lives in a household where her environment could cause distractions on a day to day basis, for herself and her classmates. With her stepmom taking online college courses around the clock, Lenger has taken on the job of caring for her 8-year-old twin sisters.

"I'm kind of like their mother-parent if that makes sense," Lenger said. "Their classes end differently than mine, so I have a timer set up, and

they'll come in ten minutes before, and they'll be asking me 'Is it time to go to class?' I tell them, 'No, it's not time to go to class. I've had a few teachers talk to me about it because it is so constant... I have to end some classes early to go make them lunch, and make sure they have food before their class starts.'

The twins were supposed to begin in-person learning during first semester, but due to the increase in COVID cases, have remained virtual. Over the past few months, Lenger shared her household with her grandmother and 10 pets — all while the house was undergoing construction.

"I feel kind of embarrassed to have a half-completed wall in my background," Lenger said. "It was hectic for a period of time, and of course with that many people online, it also led to connection issues. It's hard."

Her main concern is that she'll draw attention to herself, as her workspace constantly has to be relocated, and she can't be on camera completely focused at all times.

The SMSD administration team is also working to provide special accommodations for students with special situations, other than just allowing them to keep their cameras off.

"We will brainstorm and work with each student individually," Haney said. "In order to help them come up with a way that will at least feel more positive and willing to get on camera with what's going on. The main goal is to increase student engagement in the classroom, to find a way so that teachers can ensure that students are accounted for safe and doing what they're supposed to be doing."

MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS

Sitting at her kitchen table at midnight on Wednesday morning, freshman Rachel Brewer* felt a knot form in her throat and her eyes well up with tears. The amount of homework she had due in less than eight hours was becoming unbearable. She knew in the morning her face would show signs of a stressful late night and heightened emotions.

"On a daily basis, I'm fine with having my camera on most of the time... but sometimes when I get really stressed out, [lover grades] I'll start crying, and tears will just fall down my face," Brewer said. "I don't want the whole class and teachers to see that. There have been times when I've turned off my camera to let my emotions out, and cried for a few minutes. I can't imagine having my camera on while I'm sitting there crying."

Brewer, along with many high school students, struggles with anxiety and poor mental health. Nearly one in three of all adolescents ages 13 to 18 experience an anxiety disorder, according to the National Institutes of Health.

In a poll of 208 East students, 76.2% voted that emotions and mental health were

the main reason they wanted their camera to be optional. Brewer believes part of the issue is due to the fact that students are doing school in an un-school-like atmosphere.

"We should be in a school. But we have to be at home, and I think sometimes teachers can lose sight of how extremely difficult it is, especially for students who struggle with mental health," Brewer said. "[Cameras] should be an option. It's important that there's an option because everyone is in a different situation."

Along with mental health issues, students feel having their camera on acts as nothing more than a distraction from class.

"When you're in a classroom, you're not looking at other people in class, you're looking straight ahead, or you can at least tell when other people can look at you," senior Lincoln Renner said. "You're not constantly staring at a mirror in a school setting... something [teachers] might not realize, especially about teenagers, is that we're always self-conscious."

Some students like senior Josie Lenger felt uncomfortable and anxious with the fact that their bedrooms will be shown



I'm in my bed because I don't have a desk, and my family is in the living room. I don't want people to see my room...my room is my space.

ellie freeman | senior

behind them, knowing a majority of their peers would have never seen their homes in a COVID and remote-school-free world.

"It feels like an invasion of privacy," Lenger said. "Not everything in my room is on display for other people to see."

Others agree that the new requirement feels invasive. Students don't always have an option to be anywhere but their bedroom and students like senior Ellie Freeman feel that knowing some teachers get upset with students being in bed during class is just an addition to the increasing anxiety students have regarding online school.

"I'm in my bed because I don't have a desk, and my family is in the living room," Freeman said. "I don't want people to see my room... my room is my space."

THE OFF-CAMERA EFFECT
24 pages of failing students 45

the number of students failing classes has almost doubled since classes moved from full in-person to online

84%

Instagram poll of 411 votes

think it's unfair to have a camera requirement during school

50%

share a work environment with more than one person

Instagram poll of 216 votes

32%

Survey of 211 students

are in a situation that makes it difficult to have cameras on at all times

