

Arrests in theft of 296 Hazelwood schools' computers

Thursday, Jul. 09 2009

HAZELWOOD — St. Louis County police have broken up a burglary ring that stole nearly 300 computers worth \$332,000 from Hazelwood schools over five months.

"We've never had anything like this magnitude, this is a large amount of burglaries that caused a lot of problems for the school district," said St. Louis County police detective Sgt. Tom Lasater.

The five suspects, some of whom formerly attended some of the schools they allegedly stole from, have been charged with a raft of felonies. In all, police said, the burglars hit nine schools in 13 incidents.

The Hazelwood School District issued a statement Wednesday saying that its financial loss was limited to \$12,000 because of insurance and that security hardware had been added to all district buildings.

Superintendent Chris Wright Nicasastro could not be reached for comment on how the district reacted to the thefts, which began in September and continued into February.

Mark Behlmann, president of the Hazelwood School Board, said Wednesday that the district had changed security procedures.

"There's lots of things our schools have done over the last year, year and a half to make our schools safer," Behlmann said. He said he realized some may be skeptical, but he didn't want to advertise the new measures. "The school district was very aggressive in getting to the bottom of this and doing an investigation," he said.

In one burglary, the suspects hit Hazelwood East Middle School on Dec. 29 while students were on winter break. The thieves stole 192 laptops, wheeling their loot out of the building on carts and in garbage cans, Lasater said. They needed two trips to take all of the computers from the school, police said.

The thieves stashed the stolen property — which also included laptop power cords, a TV and a digital camera — at a vacant house, then sold the laptops for \$100 to \$300 apiece, police said. Investigators have recovered only a few of the stolen computers, Detective Jeff Warner said. The rest were sold on the street.

St. Louis County police detectives broke up the ring by tracking serial numbers on the Internet and through **LeadsOnline**.

The district's statement said the \$12,000 loss arose from insurance deductibles and property damage — mostly broken glass — that was not covered by insurance.

COMMON TARGETS

High-value items like computers at schools and universities are common targets for thieves.

St. Louis County police detectives said that computers should be locked in secure, central locations — such as a library — which have alarms, if every aspect of a building cannot be covered by alarms, security or surveillance.

The Parkway School District has cameras on the inside and outside of its high schools and middle schools, and is doing the same with its elementary buildings, said district spokeswoman Cathy Kelly.

The district's laptops are generally stored in classroom carts, and the laptops lock into the cart while they recharge. The carts are then generally locked in a classroom or storage closet, she said.

Other school districts also commonly store laptops in similar carts. At Christian Brothers College high school, an all-boys' private school in Town and Country, students are issued laptops their freshman year and their families pay for them. They have had very few incidents with laptops being stolen, mostly because students take responsibility for their investment, said Rob Staggenborg, spokesman for the school.

At Kirkwood, laptops are locked in storage carts which are then locked in a closet or classroom.

A spokeswoman for the district said technology theft is a common problem among school districts. "Every school grapples with that issue," she said.

School officials looked into tracking devices for laptops, but it was cost-prohibitive.

Among the suspects in the Hazelwood thefts is Willie M. Warren, 18, of Ferguson, who was charged with 18 felonies, including 10 counts of second-degree burglary and four counts of stealing over \$25,000. Also charged were Christopher Peter, 17, of St. Louis County; David D. Allen, 23, of Florissant and Marques D. Ray, 28, of St. Louis County, and a juvenile. All but Ray face multiple charges. Allen remains at large, but he has contacted his parole officer and knows he is wanted by police.

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