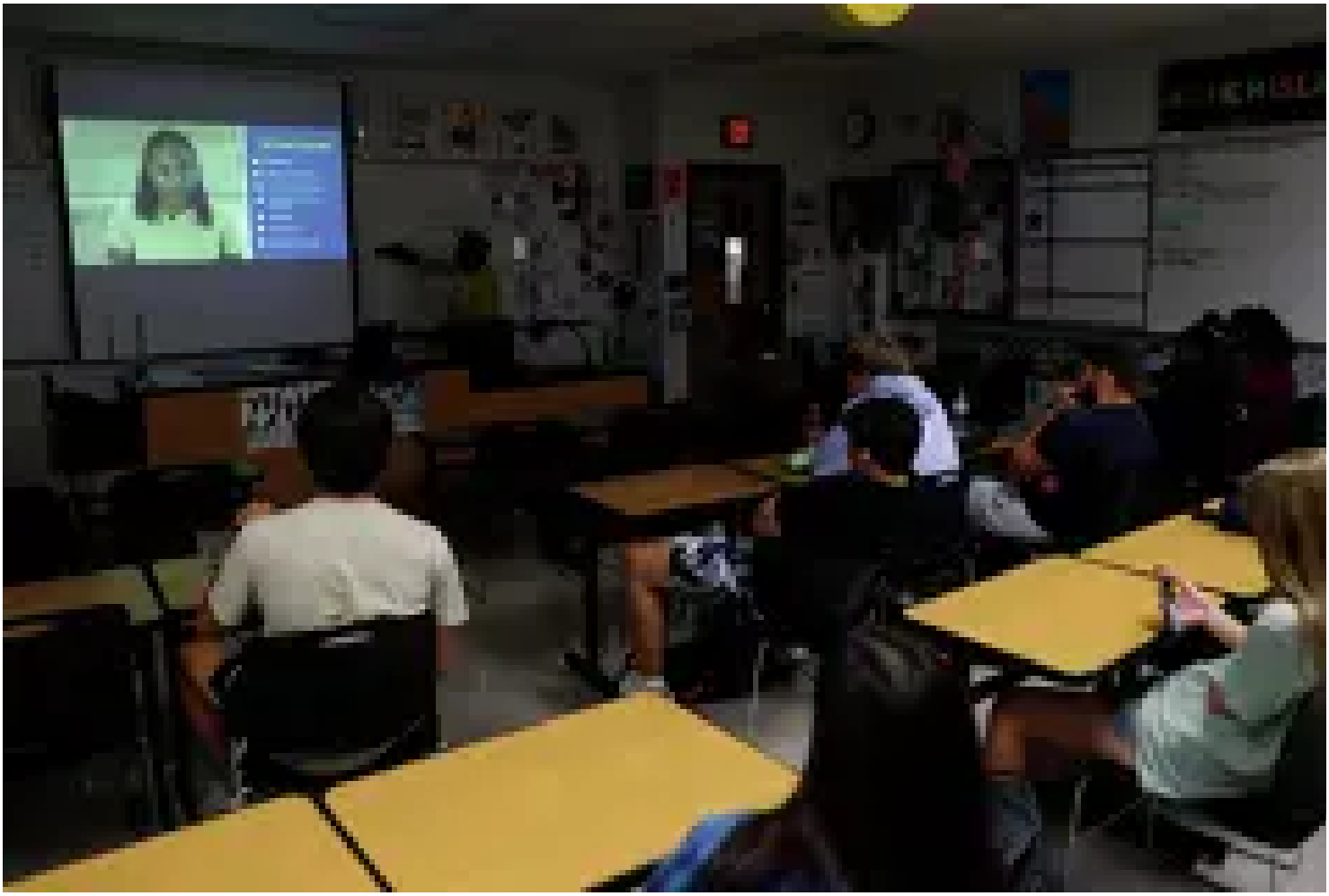
NEWS // EDUCATION

Texas spends millions on unproven school safety tool few use

iWatchTexas was touted by Gov. Abbott and DPS officials after Uvalde. But data shows it's lagging.

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Nov 11, 2022

Gift Article



Students watch as a video is played during a STOPit presentation at Frisco Lone Star High School. The STOPit tool is used by several North Texas districts and brings in far more safety tips than a statewide anonymous reporting tool called iWatchTexas. (Vernon Bryant/The Dallas Morning News)
Vernon Bryant/Staff Photographer

Texas has spent $2.2 million on a largely unused and unproven safety tool intended to thwart school shootings like the Uvalde massacre.

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After the deadly Santa Fe High School shooting in 2018, state leaders vowed to stop similar tragedies. Gov. Greg Abbott announced the expansion of iWatchTexas, a statewide suspicious activity reporting tool run through the Department of Public Safety, and encouraged students and teachers to use it.

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But the state didn't require schools to adopt or promote iWatchTexas. Over the next several years, state agencies stopped collaborating in advancing the tool, public records and government statements show. Many districts turned to other safety programs with proven track records.

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The Dallas Morning News obtained emails and data about iWatchTexas after submitting numerous public records requests. *The News* interviewed several school officials for this article after researching which anonymous reporting tools are being used by 20 districts across the state, including in Harris County and 15 of the largest systems in North Texas. None promoted iWatchTexas as the primary method for reporting suspicious activity.

The News also reviewed research on anonymous reporting systems and spoke with officials who promoted different programs.

Roughly 300 Texas school districts use STOPit, according to company officials. It is an anonymous reporting tool that leaders in several districts say works better in a campus setting and has already yielded more results.

In the past five years, STOPit has fielded 40,000 tips in Texas, including one last month in Uvalde. Dallas and a dozen other districts use a system created after the Sandy Hook shooting that also brought in thousands of tips in recent years.

iWatchTexas fielded 747 school-related tips in the three-and-a-half years after Santa Fe, according to data provided by DPS. The state refused to release metrics on how effective the tool is other than sharing the number of total tips received.

And based on the number of reports coming in, iWatchTexas trails other anonymous reporting systems.

The state's system also doesn't adhere to some research-based practices followed by the other programs, such as student-focused training. Unlike similar tools in other states, which release data on outcomes, DPS doesn't publicly report how iWatchTexas tips get resolved.

Despite its shortcomings, legislators set aside hundreds of thousands of dollars to pay for iWatchTexas each year, and state leaders continue to back it.

Related: Texas was supposed to make schools safer to stop another shooting like Uvalde

Abbott's spokesperson said iWatchTexas provides a "comprehensive analysis" of threats statewide and criticized school leaders for not embracing it. It's free for people to use. DPS officials shared anecdotal evidence to show the tool works, such as one high-profile incident in which iWatchTexas appears to have helped prevent school violence.

"[iWatchTexas] ensures that all tips coming from a variety of communities are integrated and gives law enforcement the ability to respond to threats as quickly as possible and save lives," DPS spokesperson Ericka Miller said in a statement to *The News.*

Frisco is among the districts who find STOPit to be well-suited for their needs. It allows for anonymous two-way communication between the person making a tip and the person vetting it.

"One of the things that I like better about STOPit is the messenger feature," said James Caldwell, the district safe schools coordinator. "As far as why people are not using [iWatchTexas], it's probably just that they don't know enough about it."

Lawmakers will reconvene in a few months, and school safety is likely to be a major focus. Republicans have repeatedly emphasized firearm safety, so-called school hardening, better police training and tools like iWatchTexas - over gun control measures - as their desired path to preventing future violence in classrooms.

Related: Uvalde school shooting quickly renews gun laws debate in Texas

iWatchTexas beginnings

iWatchTexas launched as a statewide suspicious activity reporting system in 2013. It expanded five years later to include a separate reporting tool for school-related tips.

Anyone can submit a report through the iWatchTexas' app, hotline or website. Tips flow to one of eight DPS regional centers, where analysts vet and, if needed, forward them to appropriate law enforcement entities or school representatives.

Not all reports are related to shootings or violence. Tipsters can alert officials to bullying, depression, eating disorders or several other types of "suspicious activity." Tips may be added to a "threat pattern," which allows law enforcement to track multiple reports about the same person over time.

Abbott touted the program in his 40-point school safety plan in 2018 and instructed state agencies to make reporting easier and increase awareness of iWatchTexas.

Related: Gov. Greg Abbott unveils school safety proposals after Santa Fe massacre

The state's follow-through effort is unclear, according to state agency statements and emails *The News* obtained through public records requests.

Emails show that in 2019, a former Abbott policy adviser indicated that state officials discussed moving away from iWatchTexas and toward "another option." More than a year later, staffers discussed iWatchTexas as a "pilot program" in internal emails.

Then, during the pandemic, the Texas Education Agency stopped working with DPS to inform schools about iWatchTexas.

"Following the tragedy in Santa Fe, TEA engaged with DPS to identify avenues to inform school systems about iWatch," according to a recent statement to *The News* from education agency officials. "Continued collaboration with

DPS and communication to school systems on the program was paused due to the onset of COVID-19 and the subsequent pandemic response."

After Uvalde, when Abbott made his renewed push, education agency officials expressed confusion about the status of iWatchTexas.

"I am no sure [sic] where this program may have ended up," a Texas Education Agency's government relations specialist wrote June 2 to a small group of high-level employees. "The question is whether this pilot actually happened and if so, which [districts] participated in it."

"I've never heard of it," the education agency's former director of safe and supportive schools responded, according to emails *The News* obtained.

Since the Uvalde shooting, DPS officials said they have provided briefings on iWatchTexas to "numerous" state and local school leaders, but did not provide a specific number or list. The iWatchTexas website notes schools are still being added to the tool's reporting system. Miller said the system has more than 11,000 schools loaded into it.

Abbott's spokesperson describes iWatchTexas as a "pilot program" prior to the pandemic. While it was discussed as such internally, public press releases and social media posts from DPS do not describe the program that way.

"Texas has since redoubled our efforts to bolster awareness of the iWatchTexas community reporting system," said Renae Eze, spokesperson for the governor.

The News asked DPS what metrics the agency uses to evaluate iWatchTexas' effectiveness and whether it hit them. Miller responded that DPS "considers every report entered into iWatchTexas a success."

Data shows iWatchTexas is lagging. Texas leaders referenced Colorado's anonymous reporting system as an example of another school safety tool in their 2018 report. That state's program - which services fewer districts and students - brought in nearly 11,400 reports during the 2020- 2021 academic year, more than 100 times the school safety reports fielded by iWatchTexas during that same period.

Colorado's system provides more transparency around how the tool works and how it is promoted. Public reports break down, among other things, how many training sessions are provided, how many people attend outreach events and the general outcome of reports.

What school safety tools work?

A recent RAND study found that increasing awareness and fostering open dialogue are important elements of any school safety reporting tool. It highlighted programs "that give students and others the option to speak or chat directly with an operator trained to interact with people in crisis."

STOPit and the reporting tool created after Newtown, the Say Something Anonymous Reporting System, both have this feature. Frisco and Grand Prairie school officials, who use STOPit, say that feature makes it preferable.

Analysts sifting through iWatchTexas reports can only contact anonymous tipsters if they provide their information.

Last year, more than 300 reports were filed with Grand Prairie's STOPit app, officials said. Frisco ISD has already received more than 600 reports through STOPit this school year. Arlington and Denton schools also used STOPit. The cost depends on the size of the district and availability of grants. Frisco paid about $25,000 for the program this year.

The Say Something Anonymous Reporting System can be free to schools through a combination of philanthropy and grants. It has a crisis center that is staffed with counselors 24/7. Nationwide, it has received roughly 120,000 tips since 2018, according to the nonprofit's data.

Texas accounts for 6% of all tips received by the program's national crisis center.

The program logged 400 imminent suicide interventions and recently prevented an 11th credible school attack, which refers to an original tip of a campus threat from someone with access to a weapon.

DPS provided the number of school-safety reports that flowed into iWatchTexas this school year. Between Aug. 1 and the end of September, it fielded fewer than 100 tips.

A study published in the Journal of School Violence found Sandy Hook Promise's system to be an "effective approach" to increasing the reporting of early signs of violence. The program is built on ongoing training with students and administrators.

iWatchTexas does not have student-specific training, DPS officials confirmed to *The News.*

Knowing buy-in from teenagers is important, some districts use their own students to promote their suspicious activity reporting apps. Frisco had high schoolers produce video testimonials about why it's important to report concerning behavior to STOPit.

Abbott tapped Chuck Norris - whose most memorable TV show went off the air before current high school seniors were born - to advertise iWatchTexas in a public service announcement.

Despite iWatchTexas pushing a school safety component four years ago, Grand Prairie officials were among those who only found out about it this school year, spokesperson Sam Buchmeyer told *The News*. Leaders from Chico ISD, a small district in Wise County, said they were similarly unaware.

"I don't know anybody that uses iWatch," Chico safety coordinator Brent Hand said. The district links to the website but has not received tips through it, he said.

A lack of transparency

DPS refused to release more information about the types and locations of tips received through iWatchTexas, the number and kinds of threat patterns identified and documents related to how analysts are trained to respond to tips. It did agree to release the names of its analysts.

iWatchTexas brings in non-school related tips, too. It netted about 18,000 general safety reports from 2018 through 2021.

TrapWire, the private security company that licenses iWatchTexas to the state, has a complicated history here.

In 2015, *The News* revealed that DPS released incorrect information that TrapWire's surveillance products on the border resulted in 44 arrests. The actual number was zero. DPS chalked it up to "an internal miscommunication," calling it an error made in "good faith."

Related: DPS admits wrongly crediting TrapWire terror alert system for arrests

Information about the company was also revealed in the 2012 WikiLeaks breach. Leaked emails from Austin-based security consulting firm STRATFOR showed its employees bragging about the commission they stood to make for introducing TrapWire to DPS.

In comments to *The News* recently, TrapWire President Dan Botsch denied STRATFOR was compensated for promoting his company and said they were not introduced to DPS through that firm's employees, one of which went on to be a high-level administrator at the agency. He pointed out the state has named TrapWire a top performing vendor for nine years but declined to comment on *The News'* findings about iWatchTexas, citing client confidentiality.

"We don't comment on how our clients use the TrapWire system and the results they obtain as we believe it is up to them to provide such comments, if they wish," he said. "My silence on those issues should not be viewed as agreement with [*The News'* findings]."

DPS officials did not provide *The News* with comprehensive data on how often tips led to teacher outreach, law enforcement intervention or some other action.

Agency officials did reference how a tip appears to have averted school violence.

In September 2021, someone reported posts from a San Patricio County teenager in which he claimed to have killed his family. When law enforcement responded, he shot himself. He had already killed three family members and two dogs, but the teenager was planning an attack on an area school, officials determined.

"We might well have been working on an even more tragic event," police wrote in a news release.

Despite its promotion as a tool to help prevent school shootings, the app's website contains a caveat: "This site is not designed to report emergencies. If this is an emergency, call 911."

How we did the story: *The Dallas Morning News* submitted a dozen public records requests related to iWatchTexas and school safety. *The News* researched anonymous reporting systems being used across multiple school districts in North Texas and statewide and interviewed several district officials. *The News* also submitted detailed questions outlining its findings to the governor's office, the Department of Public Safety and the Texas Education Agency, among other entities, to provide them an opportunity to respond.

The DMN Education Lab deepens the coverage and conversation about urgent education issues critical to the future of North Texas.

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