

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Parents continue to most strongly support data use when it benefits individual classrooms, but are increasingly comfortable with additional sharing and analysis of student data that can benefit schools and education programs beyond their child's classroom.

Summary

The Future of Privacy Forum's 2016 survey of parents of K-12 children in American public schools shows the increasing prevalence of technology use by both parents and students, increasing levels of support from parents as to the appropriate collection and use of data by schools, and continued strong belief in the possibilities of technology to improve their child's educational opportunities. FPF's second annual survey demonstrates that challenges for educators, advocates, and policymakers remain – communicate policies clearly; establish transparent practices; and work with parents as a key partner in the educational system to achieve the best learning outcomes for our children.

Key Findings Include:

- Parent and student use of school-related technology is growing quickly, but new classroom uses still raise concerns.
- Parents remain comfortable with education-related data being used to improve learning, and support is growing for use of sensitive data for beneficial purposes.
- Parents still strongly support school systems' use of student information to improve educational outcomes, but remain wary of vendor companies' role and goals.
- Parents have enthusiasm for the benefits, but also hesitation about the possible risks, when considering electronic education records.
- Parents may still see laws as part of the solution, but are even less aware of current federal laws controlling both school and vendors.

The FPF survey shows that parents of K-12 children in American public schools continue to hold a range of strong and detailed beliefs about the appropriate collection and use of technology and information to benefit their children's educational experience. They remain eager for the benefits that research and analysis of educational data can provide, and they continue to be concerned for information security, on par with concerns about personal data privacy in general. Parents are the strongest advocates for their children's educational success, and all other stakeholders in the educational system should embrace the opportunity to communicate and work with parents as partners in addressing these issues.

Background

Last year, FPF considered the growing public conversation about the use of technology in schools, and realized that there was an important gap in understanding the opinions of one key group – public school parents. The participation of external education service providers, and concerns about the collection, use, and protection of the data on individual students were driving legislative and regulatory discussions – hundreds of state laws were considered, and many were passed. While many advocates and organizations strove to speak on behalf of parents, no one systematically asked parents what they understood, what their concerns were, and what they wanted. Our initial survey in 2015 filled that gap, showing that parents were generally aware of and understood the technology used in their children’s schools, but lacked knowledge about many of the specific laws and practices that provide guidelines and important protections for their children’s information.

Since we reached those conclusions, the public conversation on this topic has continued. Therefore, we went back to parents again to find out – has their understanding grown? Have their concerns changed? And we had new questions that are framed by the ever-expanding ways technology is used in education and the effects of those newly passed laws on students and parents.

The overall context in which this survey was conducted is consistent with 2015: data on students is generated from a broad array of technology and data services. Hardware used to collect data might include devices that are purchased and provided by the school or brought from home by students, while software covers apps, programs, games, and websites used by students with or without an account. Data may also be collected by teachers and administrators using tools like Learning Management Systems to manage grades, attendance, class assignments, bus routes, school lunch programs, special education services, counseling, standardized testing, and the myriad other functions they routinely provide to students.

Survey Results

In large part, our findings paralleled those from last year. Unsurprisingly, it remains true that parents most strongly support and desire data uses that are closely tied to their own child and their child’s classroom. Parent support weakens as the link becomes more attenuated between data use and direct benefits to their child. As data use becomes less directly tied to students, parents want to comprehend the benefit to the classroom. For example, parents appear to support research when it can be used for a direct benefit to students.

What did we see change from last year to now? Technology use is spreading, fast. Almost

eighty percent of parents are now using school-related technology to keep up with their child's educational progress, and ninety percent of children are using technology provided or recommended by their school, both groups up twenty percentage points in just the last year.

In addition, parents increasingly see the value school districts gain from the use of a variety of personal data – with growing percentages saying that in addition to categories like grades and attendance, it is appropriate for schools to use disciplinary records and participation in school lunch programs. Even more noteworthy, parents may be seeing the value of broader research based on analysis that necessarily includes traditionally “sensitive” information. Support for the collection and use of parents' marital status, family income, and social security numbers all increased significantly, and perhaps most importantly, more than half of all parents surveyed now agree that race and ethnicity are data that is appropriate for schools to collect and use. The use of this type of data, appropriately controlled and protected, is critical for research that identifies potentially discriminatory policies and practices, and it is heartening to see that parents appreciate the value this data can provide when handled responsibly.

We also asked some new questions. Technology in schools is increasingly used in different ways, one of which is classroom recordings of teacher/student interactions – whether for internal class use, to model teaching or learning strategies, or to share with other educators. Parental responses to our question about this technology demonstrates how important transparency and clear communication are between schools and parents; when asked about these videos being shared on-line, parents offer a mixed and even internally inconsistent point of view. A large majority support the creation of classroom recordings, but want to be informed about it and want the chance to opt their child out.

This desire to be aware of uses like classroom recordings reflects more generally a new finding that nearly all parents believe they should be informed when their child's record is being shared – parents want to know why the record was shared and with whom. Further, parents' control over their child's data is in conflict with a troubling trend in state laws, which may limit parents' rights. While schools have the ability to share educational records with partner vendors for core educational functions, some parents want to protect their ability to authorize disclosure of their child's electronic record to external third parties – for example, for tutoring programs, non-school-sponsored educational clubs or activities, or financial aid and advance educational programs. However, many recent state laws either prohibit this parental control altogether, or narrowly limit it to colleges and prospective employers only. This trend is particularly troubling because parents may want the ability to explore for their children through their education, not just in time for post-graduation concerns with colleges and employment. Some parents preferred to exercise this choice via “opt-in,” others want “opt-out” or by direct request only, but less than half agree that parents' choices should be limited or banned entirely. Policymakers should take note – rather than a legislative limitation, parents want lawmakers to allow parents, teachers, and

schools to make the best decisions for themselves.

Overall, the findings of this survey continue to be consistent with surveys of Americans regarding privacy and security concerns generally, tracking across other industries that collect and use personal or sensitive data such as the financial and health fields.¹ While parents have concerns about security, most are not specific to the school environment but reflect the same broad security concerns that American adults have expressed in other research.²

An important area that remains a prime target for better communication and awareness is helping parents understand current laws and practices that protect student data. Slightly fewer parents than last year felt confident that they know what federal laws currently protect student data, or what those laws require. This is such a clear issue that advocates and educators at all levels should focus part of their future outreach on making parents aware of these existing constraints.

¹ Id.; ONC Data Brief, No. 27, June 2015, “Individuals’ Perceptions of the Privacy and Security of Medical Records,” Office of the Nat’l Coordinator for Health Information Technology, at <https://www.healthit.gov/sites/default/files/briefs/oncatabrief27june2015privacyandsecurity.pdf>

² “Americans Attitudes About Privacy, Security, and Surveillance,” May 20, 2015, Pew Research Center for Internet, Science and Tech, at <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/05/20/americans-attitudes-about-privacy-security-and-surveillance/> (hereafter, “Pew Survey”).