



# Beyond the Screen

## Parents' Experiences with Student Activity Monitoring in K-12 Schools

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## Parents' Experiences with Student Activity Monitoring in K-12 Schools

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# Introduction

The role of technology in K-12 education continues to grow, and schools across the U.S. are turning to monitoring technologies to track students' online activity. Yet, as student activity monitoring has become commonplace, students and parents report concerns about irresponsible uses of these tools even as they recognize their potential benefits.

Over the past two years, CDT has investigated the rise in popularity of student activity monitoring technology, and the benefits and risks it poses to students' well-being. Survey research conducted last summer revealed that 9 out of 10 secondary school teachers report that their schools use student activity monitoring technology and that these tools are used for disciplinary applications more often than for student safety (Laird et al., 2022). In addition, 44 percent of teachers report that a student in their schools was contacted by law enforcement because of student activity monitoring, and 29 percent of LGBTQ+ students report that they or someone they know were involuntarily "outed" due to this technology (Laird et al., 2022). These trends indicate that student activity monitoring may be negatively impacting the well-being and safety of a large proportion of students. Further, Black, Hispanic, and LGBTQ+ students report experiencing disproportionate harm compared to other students (Laird et al., 2022).

To examine these impacts in greater depth, CDT recently conducted twenty interviews with parents whose children have experienced short- and long-term consequences based on the use of student activity monitoring technology. This new research sheds light on the first-hand experiences of students and their families who were impacted by student activity monitoring. The stories of these parents paint a more complete picture of the effects of student activity monitoring on students, the ways schools respond to the information collected, and the changes parents want to see if these systems continue to be implemented.

CDT's interviews with parents identified six main findings:

1. The most common type of activity flagged by student activity monitoring software was the **viewing of inappropriate content**.
2. Monitoring has a **chilling effect** on students' speech and use of the internet, which can also impact their learning.
3. The actions that follow the monitoring and reporting of student activity can have **significant emotional impacts** on students.
4. Monitoring can **undermine relationships** between students and adults including their teachers and school administrators.



**CDT recently conducted twenty interviews with parents whose children have experienced short- and long-term consequences based on the use of student activity monitoring technology. This new research sheds light on the first-hand experiences of students and their families who were impacted by student activity monitoring.**

5. Student activity monitoring alerts were not always kept private, resulting in **stigmatizing students**.
6. Monitoring can **catalyze negative student behavior** and lead to direct threats to students' safety and future well-being.

Based on their experiences, parents prioritized four key areas of change for how student activity monitoring should be conducted:

- More **transparency** about the student activity monitoring decision-making process.
- A **narrower scope** of student activity monitoring use.
- More careful, **nuanced responses** to alerts generated from monitoring systems.
- A more **active role for parents** themselves in responding to alerts.

# Main Findings

Local education agencies (LEAs) often view the use of student activity monitoring software on school-issued devices and networks as necessary tools to promote student safety and security, and in some cases to comply with perceived federal educational requirements (Hankerson, et. al. 2021). However, our interviews with parents indicate that actions taken by school officials related to the use of student activity monitoring software can cause disproportionate and harmful consequences.

**Finding #1: The most common type of activity flagged by student activity monitoring software was the *viewing of inappropriate content*.**

Parents raised examples of different types of student behaviors that the school flagged using student activity monitoring software. These examples were consistent, regardless of whether parents' views on monitoring systems were positive or negative. The most common (in 10 of the parent interviews) was where their child viewed or shared inappropriate content as defined by the school, and often included accessing banned sites (e.g., YouTube) or, in very few cases, pornography. In some cases, students accessed content for research purposes that was flagged by the school as inappropriate, based on the school's values. This sometimes happened even when the parents did not think the content was inappropriate. For example, one parent noted their child was looking up the Defense of Marriage Act, but was told that some of the content they accessed was inappropriate:

*“My son was researching online to write an essay on the pros and cons of DOMA (Defense of Marriage Act) and its implications. He was told that some of the content was inappropriate and would not be allowed. This seems pretty extreme to me as I viewed the materials and there is nothing obscene or even objectionable.” – Parent of a 10th grader (January 2023)*

In another case, a student was researching the news media as part of their school work and accessed sites that promoted conspiracy theories. This was also flagged by the school as inappropriate. In both cases, parents felt that the school's response (e.g., reporting the student to the principal, dean, or in one case the police) was disproportionate to their child's actions.

**In cases of bullying, parents of children that were targeted appreciated the use of activity monitoring software but were still concerned about some of the long-term effects of the actions taken by the school (for example the lack of privacy in how the schools handled the monitoring incident).**

The second most common type of activity that was flagged by monitoring software was bullying or online harassment (6 interviews). This ranged from threats of physical violence and harassment to outing LGBTQ+ students and included harmful content both sent and received by students. In cases of bullying, parents of children that were targeted appreciated the use of activity monitoring software but were still concerned about some of the long-term effects of the actions taken by the school (see for example the lack of privacy in how the schools handled the monitoring incident later in the report).

The two other types of behaviors flagged by the school included behaviors that suggested a risk of potential self-harm by the student (2 interviews), and engaging in off-task activities during class, such as listening to music (1 interview). One other incident involved a combination of the teacher spotting inappropriate content along with the monitoring software.

**Finding #2: Monitoring has a *chilling effect* on students, which can also impact their learning.**

Several parents observed that, as a result of the use of student activity monitoring software by the school, students modified their behavior online. This included limiting or changing how they communicated with other students and also their teacher, or changing what kinds of content they might engage with online. This observed chilling effect, where students change what they say and do because they know they are being surveilled, is unfortunately a common consequence of student activity monitoring software. A 2021 national survey commissioned by CDT found that almost 60% of students reported that they held back from saying what they truly meant online because they were being monitored ([CDT, 2021](#)). This was echoed by parents in the interviews. For example, one parent described how their child felt after an incident in which one of their online search queries for a research project was incorrectly flagged as related to suicide:

*“[He was] humiliated, embarrassed, just really frustrated and angry ..., and he’s like, well, now I’m afraid to talk [or] type anything in, I don’t want the same situation to happen again.” – Parent of a 12th grader (January 2023)*

Chilling effects can have significant implications for learning and mental health ([Quay-de la Vallee, 2022](#)). As one parent noted, their student was now less likely to talk in class compared to before a reporting incident and less likely to engage with activities and school work online. Parents were also concerned about the potential long-term impacts this could have on learning. As another parent put it:

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*“I don’t want it to take away that enthusiasm to get into those subjects because school is supposed to be that receptive environment, they are growing minds, they’re shaping future leaders, future doctors, politicians, bricklayers and everybody in between. So I don’t want that to affect the long-term [for my child].” – Parent of a 10th grader (January 2023)*

Another potential consequence of these chilling effects is limiting opportunities for students to develop a sense of who they are. Privacy is an important way to create a space to develop one’s identity and beliefs ([Richards, 2021](#)), which is particularly important for teenagers and children in school. As one parent noted, it’s perfectly normal for students to use both educational and social aspects of school to learn and inform their beliefs and identity:

*“...when they’re in high school they’re trying to figure out things in their own mind as teenagers. Like, identity or what they believe in. So [they’re] curious and they’re very proactive in causes and stuff. They’re very involved in a lot of the political aspects of the world” – Parent of a 10th grader (December 2022)*

Another parent noted that a lack of privacy due to monitoring can limit these discussions of identity:

*“If they’re being watched, there would probably be an unwillingness to voice their opinions on certain subject[s], or voice aspects of their identity. And the general concept of privacy being important to everyone is also something to consider,... people like their privacy.” – Parent of a 9th grader (December 2022)*

### **Finding #3: The actions that follow the monitoring and reporting of student activity can have *significant emotional impacts* on students.**

Several parents we interviewed observed that sometimes the flagging of inappropriate material itself wasn’t as significant as the actions that followed the use of student activity monitoring software. In some cases, those experiences created mental and psychological impacts and were stressful for the student. For example, one parent noted that their son and his friends at school unknowingly received an email that contained gay pornographic content, which was then flagged by the school’s monitoring software. The flag initiated the school’s investigation, and in the process, other students became aware of the incident (although it’s not clear how others found out). Eventually, it led to the outing of the receiving child as gay, with significant consequences:

*“So this whole experience kind of outed him and that’s like, for me that’s probably the most unfair thing of all the thing[s] I’m most upset about. He was very afraid. You know, he was kind of crying...It’s, it was very traumatic. And I mean, for now he wants to stay at the school...we’ll see what happens by the end of this year.” – Parent of 9th grader (December 2022)*

In other cases, the disciplinary process can be harrowing for students, particularly when they did not think they were doing anything wrong. One student’s online searches for LGBTQ+ content were flagged as inappropriate. When the student was questioned by the school about their searches they were left feeling embarrassed:

*“[...] you know he used to be so excited to go school and now he just looked like, you know, he’s just like dreading it and when he comes home he[’s] just in his room a lot more than just being outside and just like he used to be really happy and go-lucky and now he just moved gloomy than before. I’m just hoping that as time passes, people forget about it but, you know, it’s still fresh and he’s still traumatized over it.” –*

*Parent of 9th grader (January 2023)*

**“I don’t want it to take away that enthusiasm to get into those subjects because school is supposed to be that receptive environment, they are growing minds, they’re shaping future leaders, future doctors, politicians, bricklayers and everybody in between. So I don’t want that to affect the long-term [for my child].”**

Another parent recounted a similar incident in which a student was researching racism in the U.S., and the content they accessed was flagged as inappropriate. The student did not think they did anything wrong:

*“We had to go talk to his principal at the time about why he was accessing this material. And, whether he had these beliefs...this kid who does really well in school and hasn’t had other problems.... I don’t know if you’ve ever been in the principal’s office, but it was very stressful for him.” – Parent of 9th grader (December 2022)*

#### **Finding #4: Monitoring can *undermine relationships* between students and adults including their teachers and school administrators.**

The lack of privacy around some of the incidents that were flagged coupled with the perception that students did something wrong, even in cases where their school work activities were flagged, can also negatively impact students by undermining their trust in the school and their teachers. Parents often described their children feeling that their privacy had been invaded, which had an impact on how the students related to their teacher. In some cases, the monitoring was surprising to the student, who may not have been aware of the scale or nature of it. This surprise combined with the feeling that their privacy was (unjustly) invaded can undermine the relationship between the student and teacher. One parent described the aftermath of a disciplinary incident:

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*“After that, there were more issues [between my son and] that teacher...it created a bad rapport between the both of them.” – Parent of 11th grader (December 2022)*

The use of monitoring also represents a form of control that some students felt went too far, and in some cases not only impacted one-on-one interaction with teachers but other interpersonal dynamics in the classroom:

*“So I guess he [the student] had a disdain for her [the teacher] like...she’s singling me out and trying to embarrass me in front of the class for no reason. And I’m sure her take was, he’s being disrespectful in my class and he’s not following my rules. And, you know, they both left [the monitoring incident] with a distrust of each other or disdain for each other.” – Parent of 11th grader (December 2022)*

### **Finding #5: Student activity monitoring alerts were not always kept private, resulting in stigmatizing students.**

The lack of privacy around how schools handled some incidents where students’ activities were flagged by monitoring software was problematic. As one parent noted:

*“I don’t know how other students found out but there was no confidentiality or privacy.” – Parent of a 9th grader (January 2023)*

In another example, the parent said that their student was flagged by the monitoring software for being off-task and exchanging messages with other students during a remote class. The teacher called out the student, and without knowing the content of the messages, shared their screen with the class. The messages were personal and their public sharing was highly embarrassing for the student. In this and other cases, the parents, while saying that the software had its place, were left disappointed with how the school handled the flagged activity with their student.

### **Finding #6: Monitoring can catalyze negative student behavior and lead to direct threats to the student’s safety and future well-being.**

The use of student activity monitoring software can easily and unnecessarily escalate a situation, depending on how the student and the school react to alerts generated by the monitoring system. In one case, a student wanted to charge their personal cell phone and so connected it to a school-issued laptop. However, upon connecting, the phone started uploading content to the school laptop. The teacher was informed

about potentially inappropriate content on the laptop and asked for the student's phone. The student, who had no idea that their phone's content was shared with the laptop, resisted, leading to an argument with the teacher. In retrospect, the student was particularly upset with the teacher's reaction, in part because they did not know about the monitoring software, and also because they felt that their phone was their personal device. They were eventually sent to the principal, who determined that the flagged content was fine and was not subject to further school action.

However, there were instances when the escalation was much more serious, particularly when the school called for the intervention of law enforcement. One parent noted:

**"My son voiced his opinion on a site that wasn't blocked about social injustices. The school and I were contacted by [law enforcement]. Initially, I was told that I was being contacted by local police because my child was being bullied. But when they showed up, they then told the truth about who they were [law enforcement] agents."**

*"My son voiced his opinion on a site that wasn't blocked about social injustices. The school and I were contacted by [law enforcement]. Initially, I was told that I was being contacted by local police because my child was being bullied. But when they showed up, they then told the truth about who they were [law enforcement] agents. My son was not being bullied but it was because of the post he made. They showed up in a big black SUV and it was very scary. – Parent of 11th grader (December 2022)*

Incidents such as these also raised concern among parents about their children's rights as well as concern for their immediate safety:

*"He was spoken to by the social worker and principal without my knowledge. When the police were called to speak to my son and the other boy, that is when I was called. It took me about a half hour to get to the school but they questioned him for about an hour without me being present or without my consent." – Parent of 9th grader (January 2023)*

A more long-term concern voiced by some parents was that incidents, especially those that called for law enforcement, could be made part of their child's student record. They worried that this could have implications for their child's future career.

# Recommendations

Parents expressed concerns with the current role of student activity monitoring software in schools even as they identified ways in which student activity monitoring could provide value to students. Based on their experiences with the impacts of monitoring technology, the parents we interviewed called for four changes to how schools use these tools to strike a useful balance of capturing potential benefits while avoiding risks.

## Parents Want More Transparency About How Schools Use Monitoring Technology

Parents expressed a lack of awareness about how their children's schools are utilizing student activity monitoring, as well as how the data generated from monitoring software is being used. Although some parents acknowledged that they may have overlooked some details of the monitoring system's functionality in school communications, their overall sentiment was that schools are not being fully transparent about their use of these tools. In particular, parents noted uncertainty around what kind of content is monitored, who has access to monitoring data, and how this data is used in disciplinary decisions:

*“If you thought the process that you had was a good one, a really viable and a fair one, then you wouldn't be concerned about sharing how the process works and who is involved in it.” – Parent of 9th grader*

As a result of this lack of transparency, parents felt they were unable to make informed decisions, including providing consent for their child to use a school-issued device or account since they do not know what they are agreeing to. This exacerbated parents' frustration when they realized that monitoring software was being used for purposes that they did not agree with or know about.

### Action

Parents want schools and districts to be more transparent about the student activity monitoring decision-making process. Specifically, parents want clear information on who is involved with monitoring, what kinds of student activities are being monitored, when monitoring is active, and who has access to monitoring data. In addition, they want to know what kinds of content will generate a flag in the system and how these alerts will be used. Parents expect schools to present this information clearly and proactively, not just after an incident has occurred.

## Parents Want to Narrow the Scope of Student Activity Monitoring Use

Overall, parents felt that their children’s schools’ use of monitoring software was far too broad. Parents generally expressed the most support for using monitoring software to identify mental health risks and directing better mental health support to students, but support dropped for other uses. They suggested narrowing both the scope of activity subject to monitoring software’s purview (e.g., not monitoring activity outside of school hours or in students’ personal lives), as well as the range of issues that monitoring software was identifying (e.g. minor disciplinary infractions).

*“Enabling real-time visibility into what students are looking at, this seems so invasive. This is hard for me because at a younger age I understand a little bit more but at 17 or 18, I think they deserve some level of privacy.” – Parent of 10th-grade student*

Parents were wary of using monitoring software to flag relatively minor disciplinary issues, and, as noted earlier, recounted incidents where trivial conflicts unnecessarily escalated due to reliance on monitoring software. Parents reported that these instances resulted in doing more harm than good. Moreover, parents opposed use of monitoring software that inadvertently identified LGBTQ+ students, citing that this was clear mismanagement and an overreach of school authority:

*“Now several of his friends are beginning to talk about him being gay where he didn’t want to share that with the world just yet.” – Parent of 9th-grade student who was inadvertently outed through a disciplinary incident prompted by monitoring technology*

Parents are also concerned about the mental and psychological impacts of extensive online monitoring. Per parents’ expectations, student activity monitoring, if used at all, should focus on directing mental health support to students. Some parents noted, however, that their children seemed more guarded in their self-expression after being involved in school incidents related to monitoring software, and indicated these interactions likely left a lasting toll on their mental health.

### Action

Parents want schools to narrow the scope of their monitoring systems. Schools should reduce the reliance on monitoring software to identify minor disciplinary infractions, and should never try to determine LGBTQ+ status or disclose that information, even if accidentally collected. In addition, schools should avoid invasive forms of monitoring software, such as monitoring outside of school hours, monitoring of students’ personal accounts, and real-time screen monitoring.

**“If you thought the process that you had was a good one, a really viable and a fair one, then you wouldn’t be concerned about sharing how the process works and who is involved in it.”**

## Recommendations

### Parents Want More Responsible Ways of Addressing Alerts from Monitoring Systems

In recounting their experiences with student activity monitoring systems, parents felt that schools tend to react to alerts they generate with a “one-size-fits-all” approach, often leading to disproportionate school reactions that lack nuance. The school’s knee-jerk responses to flags generated by monitoring software — such as by sending students to the principal’s office on accusations that were later withdrawn — often cause more harm than good. Algorithmic processes that often drive monitoring software alerts are notorious for their lack of nuance, and parents’ observations suggest that these blunt approaches are being propagated through the layers of human decision-making at schools:

*“I would be ninety percent in favor of anything that supports student privacy with minimalist exceptions that are like extreme student safety concerns. ... I think everything else can be handled outside of monitoring and more through investigation on the school’s part.” – Parent of 9th-grade student*

Parents expressed particular alarm at the threat of law enforcement involvement based on alerts from monitoring software. Police interaction is perceived as a very serious escalation, and should be approached with extreme judiciousness by school staff. Multiple parents noted incidents in which school officials contacted law enforcement after receiving alerts from monitoring software, which further compounded students’ anxiety about being surveilled.

#### **Action**

Parents want schools to develop more careful, nuanced procedures for responding to student activity monitoring alerts. They urge school leaders to prioritize flexibility and proportionality in their response to incidents and to ascertain all relevant details of a flagged event before escalating it further. In addition, parents generally prefer to avoid involving law enforcement whenever an incident can be adequately addressed by school authorities alone.

## Parents Want to be More Involved in Decisions Concerning Student Activity Monitoring Systems

Incidents flagged by student activity monitoring can lead to conversations with students around serious, sensitive issues, but parents noted that they often only learn about such incidents involving their children after the fact. Parents expressed frustration when they are not consulted in decisions related to monitoring technology. This sentiment is particularly acute around disciplinary actions, especially when parents feel that a decision has been made in the absence of key contextual information that they could have provided:

**“I would be ninety percent in favor of anything that supports student privacy with minimalist exceptions that are like extreme student safety concerns. ... I think everything else can be handled outside of monitoring and more through investigation on the school’s part.”**

*“That’s what I...was bothered by, that it wasn’t like, ‘Let’s bring the parent into the conversation at the very beginning.’ It was more like, ‘We’re going to investigate with the student first and then we’ll let the parent know.’ I just didn’t think that was okay.” – Parent of 11th-grade student*

Parents noted this issue is exacerbated when they lack awareness of the student activity monitoring system in the first place, as discussed above. For parents who disagreed with the school’s use of monitoring software itself, a perceived lack of agency feels quite frustrating.

### Action

Parents want to play a more active role in school decision-making processes that involve student activity monitoring software. This includes both decisions about how monitoring technology will be used, as well as specific decisions based on the data it collects. Parents want to provide input and contextual information, particularly when students are facing potential disciplinary action due to monitoring software alerts.

# Conclusion

**S**tudent activity monitoring technology continues to have serious impacts on K-12 students, often in harmful ways. Parents are an important group of stakeholders that is invested in ensuring student activity monitoring does not negatively affect their children's educational experiences.

In evaluating decisions regarding monitoring technology, school leaders should engage parents and other family members in their community, and endeavor to work together to develop a responsible approach to using monitoring technology in schools.



# Methodology

This research was based on interviews with parents of students who have had direct experience with student activity monitoring. The interviews were done between December 2022 and January 2023 by Edge Research on behalf of CDT. A total of 20 interviews were completed with parents of high school students in public schools who perceived their experience to be positive, negative, or both.

Participants included a mix of racial/ethnic backgrounds, geography, and other demographics (e.g., gender, income). The interviews were up to 60 minutes in length, conducted virtually, and recorded. We used a thematic analysis approach on the resulting transcripts to develop the findings in this report.



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