Parents' Experiences with Student Activity Monitoring in K-12 Schools: Summary Brief

Often with the stated aim of promoting student safety, K-12 schools have turned to student activity monitoring technologies to track students' online activity en masse. However, survey research conducted last summer by CDT revealed that while 9 out of 10 secondary school teachers report that their schools use student activity monitoring technology, these tools are used for disciplinary applications more often than for student safety, altering the relationship between students and their schools.

Students' families bear direct witness to the impacts of monitoring software on students' educational experiences, including the potential benefits of these tools as well as risks they introduce. To examine these impacts in greater depth, CDT recently conducted twenty interviews with parents whose children have experienced short- and long-term consequences of using student activity monitoring technology. This new research illustrates 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.

Online monitoring erodes students' trust and engagement at school.

Regardless of outcome and their support of monitoring, many parents reported that the use of student activity monitoring technologies led to **long-term changes in student behavior**. Parents emphasized unintended consequences that eroded students' trust in the school, often related to incidents of the school staff's careless or uncritical use of data generated by monitoring software. Parents also reported that online monitoring had an overarching **"chilling effect"** on students' willingness to express themselves candidly online, their identity formation, and harming their mental health.

These long-term negative impacts were mentioned even by parents who express support for monitoring software and credit it with helping their child. The ubiquity of these findings highlights how potential benefits of monitoring software do not obviate its risks.

"[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)

Alerts from monitoring software might not stay private.

Several parents reported that the alerts generated by student activity monitoring software were not kept private. Rather, information about students' personal lives was at times **shared with other students** and in some cases, even the entire class. Given the sensitive nature of information collected by monitoring software

— such as students' gender identity or sexual orientation — these situations exposed students to unwanted public stigma, causing further stress.

These instances of involuntary disclosure of personal information are unsurprising given a lack of teacher training on privacy and security. Previous CDT research found that only **31 percent** of teachers whose school uses student activity monitoring report that they have received guidance about how to use these systems privately and securely.

"I don't know how other students found out but there was no confidentiality or privacy."

– Parent of a 9th grader (January 2023)

Hasty reactions to monitoring software alerts escalate student responses.

Use of monitoring software often led to schools taking disciplinary action against students, as previous research showed. However, parents explained that the infraction against school disciplinary policy was not always about the data collected by monitoring software itself. Rather, some parents explained how monitoring software erroneously flagged legitimate online activity, to which school staff responded in a hasty and unpredictable manner, leading to student backlash. Multiple parents recounted incidents where the police were called based on monitoring software data only to conclude students' online activity was permissible.

In incidents like these, parents also voiced frustration about their own role (or lack thereof) in school decision-making. Parents noted that they often found out about what happened after the fact as schools confronted students directly.

Take Action: **Parents Want to be More Involved**

Parents have clear expectations for how schools can use student activity monitoring software more responsibly, but consistently report feeling kept out of the loop on these issues. Feedback from parents with firsthand experience want to be more involved in schools' responses to these alerts. In particular, they call for a more narrow scope of monitoring and more careful, transparent processes to respond to monitoring flags. In evaluating decisions regarding monitoring technology, school leaders should engage parents and endeavor to work together to develop a responsible approach to using monitoring technology in schools.

Learn More
Read the full research report at: https://cdt.org/insights/report-beyond-the-screen-parents-experiences-with-student-activity-monitoring-in-k-12-schools/

The Center for Democracy & Technology (CDT) is the leading nonpartisan, nonprofit organization fighting to advance civil rights and civil liberties in the digital age. We shape technology policy, governance, and design with a focus on equity and democratic values. Established in 1994, CDT has been a trusted advocate for digital rights since the earliest days of the internet.