

## OLA IFC Tuesday Topics Nov. 2019: Safeguarding student privacy in schools

Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee or a guest writer. Questions can be directed to the author of the topic or to the IFC Committee.



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### Safeguarding student privacy in schools

Parents -- at least those with younger children -- can choose to limit how much information they share online about their kids. However, as schools increasingly use cloud-based services (and issue Chromebooks, iPads, and other devices) the potential unwanted sharing of student information has exploded.

It's important to know what sort of data vendors are collecting about students, and what they are doing to protect their information.

School districts often contract with multiple third-party vendors for cloud-based software and services to track student attendance, test scores, educational plans, student work samples, health information, and other data. Teachers may also frequently sign their classes up for educational apps and websites -- classroom social media sites, typing or math practice, ebook providers, and much more. Some districts have developed privacy policies and evaluate these services to make sure they don't share student data or collect more than necessary; others have not.

For example, many school districts now issue Chromebooks to students and enroll them and school employees in Google Apps for Education. While tools like Google Docs, Classroom, and Drive are very useful (and free to schools), some have questioned how Google uses children's data. While Google says it does not collect information on students for advertising purposes, that may not always be true. In 2015, the Electronic Frontier Foundation filed [a complaint with the FTC](#) alleging that Google was tracking students and building profiles on them. Google claims to have changed its practices in response. Most recently, in September 2019, [Google paid a \\$170 million fine](#) for violating the federal Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, or COPPA, after

regulators said that YouTube, which Google owns, “knowingly and illegally harvested personal information from children and used it to profit by targeting them with ads.” So, even for companies that have strong written privacy policies, those sites may not always follow their own policies.

School libraries also need to be concerned about their own data collection. For example, school librarians should ensure that library circulation records aren’t stored forever, and that notes and other information in our library systems are regularly deleted. We need to make sure that our ebook and database providers follow laws about collecting personal information about students and their reading or research habits. When the [Statewide Database Licensing Advisory Committee](#) chooses databases for libraries in Oregon, for example, privacy is an important criterion in the selection process.

Many school districts do have written privacy policies that guide selection of software and educational apps or services. However, they depend heavily on what the companies say about their own policies, and districts aren’t often able to investigate the company’s actual practices. Other districts do not have policies or do not use privacy policies as one of the criteria for choosing services. Most do allow parents and guardians to opt their students out of a particular app, but if most other students are using a service, this can create difficulties.

How can schools, parents/guardians, and concerned community members help address these issues?

- Learn more about the [Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule \(COPPA\)](#), the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#), and [state laws](#) regarding student data privacy.
- Develop policies -- or, for community members, ask about written policies -- regarding the privacy of student data.
- Make sure the services we use don’t retain personally identifying information about students beyond what is absolutely necessary.
- Ensure that third-party vendors do not sell student information, or track students for advertising purposes.
- Be aware of what students are using in class and what information those services track.
- Encourage schools to pay for the best online services if that means companies earn revenue from subscriptions rather than from collecting and selling student data.

**Find Out More**

“EPIC Student Privacy Project.” *EPIC*, Electronic Privacy Information Center,  
<https://epic.org/privacy/student/>.

Gebhart, Gennie. “Spying on Students: School-Issued Devices and Student Privacy.”  
*Electronic Frontier Foundation*, 15 Feb. 2018,  
[www.eff.org/wp/school-issued-devices-and-student-privacy](http://www.eff.org/wp/school-issued-devices-and-student-privacy).

“A Parents’ Guide to Student Data Privacy.” *Ferpa Sherpa*, The Education Privacy  
Resource Center,  
<https://ferpasherpa.org/parents/a-parents-guide-to-student-data-privacy/>.

“Student Records and Privacy.” *Students & Families : State of Oregon*, Oregon  
Department of Education,  
<https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and-family/Pages/Student-Records-and-Privacy.aspx>.

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