PROTECTING STUDENTS' PRIVACY & ADVANCING DIGITAL EQUITY

Parents and teachers support education technology, but more must be done to defend the privacy and civil rights of students

OCTOBER 2020

During the COVID-19 pandemic, new and urgent challenges are emerging in education that must be understood and addressed. As the trend toward virtual learning and the increased use of data and technology has intensified, parents and teachers are doing their best to navigate an ever-changing educational landscape full of new obstacles that put the digital rights of the children under their care at risk.

A core pillar of responsible data use and privacy protection is lifting up voices of those who are most affected. In the case of education, that means parents, teachers, and students themselves. These perspectives are chronically underrepresented in discussions about how data and technology can be used while not sacrificing student privacy and civil rights.

Changing this dynamic will require listening to those missing voices. To help policymakers, educators, parents, and students better understand the complexities so they can be addressed, the **Center for Democracy and Technology** (CDT) commissioned research on the views of those who have the most at stake. And those voices suggest that to appropriately protect students' privacy, policymakers and practitioners should take four critical actions:

1. Use technology **responsibly** to support students

2. Tailor student privacy efforts to **meet people** where they are

3. **Close the digital divide** while protecting privacy

4. Build upon promising student **privacy practices**

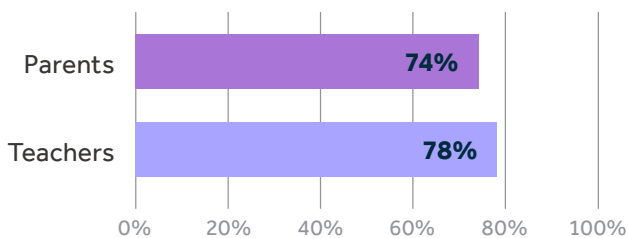# 1 | Use technology **responsibly** to support students

INSIGHTS

Parents and teachers strongly support an increased level of online learning even after the pandemic, and the shift to remote learning this year has only strengthened this resolve.

Following the pandemic, parents and teachers are likely to support continuing an increased level of online learning at home...

Parents	**76%**
Teachers	**76%**

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%
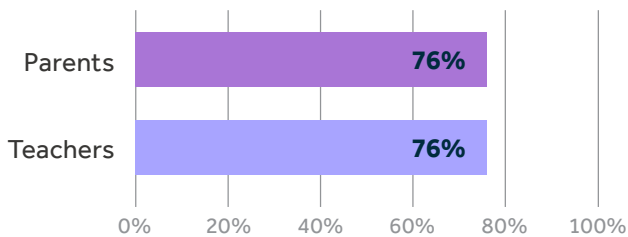
As well as in the classroom...

Parents	**74%**
Teachers	**78%**

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

Twice as many teachers say that education technology is "very important" during the pandemic (86%), than say it was "very important" prior to the pandemic (44%).

ACTION

Prioritize the responsible use of technology.

Given this forward-looking support, it is incumbent on policymakers and practitioners to ensure that technology is used responsibly, in a way that increases educational opportunities for students and does not sacrifice student privacy or civil rights.

"We need to be diligent in monitoring; kids are kids. They have some knowledge, but they need us to do the oversight."

— 6th-10th Grade Teacher

2 | Tailor student privacy efforts to **meet people** where they are . . .

INSIGHTS

Generally speaking, privacy is not a top concern for parents, teachers, or students relative to other concerns. Their worry increases, however, as they are exposed to additional details on student privacy risks and other external events. And 1 in 3 parents and teachers have increased concerns about student privacy during the pandemic.

Before exposure to additional detail on threats to student privacy, parents and teachers have varying levels of concern about privacy and the security of student data and information collected by schools...

Parents	**62%**
Teachers	**44%**

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%
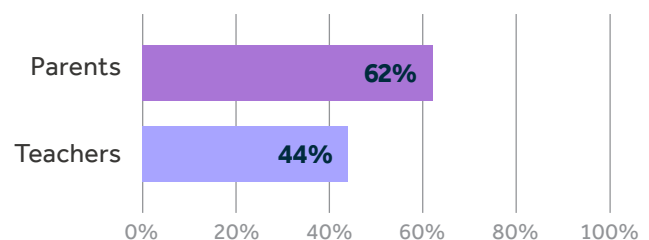
Customize information and engagement on student privacy to your audience's specific interests and concerns.

With parents being more concerned than teachers (and with students having spent little time contemplating the privacy of their data), policymakers and practitioners can protect student privacy most effectively by acknowledging that various stakeholders approach these issues from different places and would benefit from information and engagement that is tailored to their specific interests and concerns.

"I don't really think about [privacy] that much or worry about it. I know a lot about the internet, so I'm not really worried."
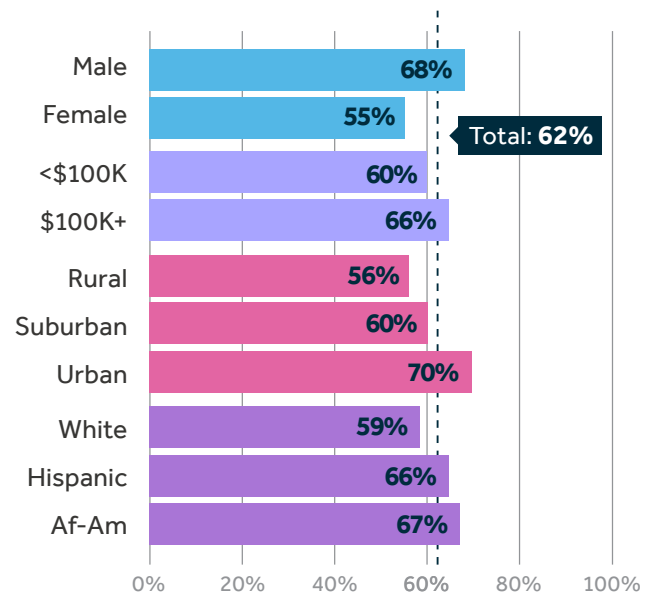
— *Middle School Student*

Parents: communicate with and engage

INSIGHTS

Seventy percent of parents trust schools with information being collected, but over half of parents feel that they are the most responsible for protecting their child's data. At the same time, they report low awareness of and involvement in their school's data privacy plan, with only 4 in 10 parents saying their school has discussed with them how it protects student data. Parents' concerns grow with increased exposure to information and student privacy scenarios, from 62% to 69%.

That said, parents are not a monolith, and there are notable differences of opinion related to student privacy across gender, income, geography, and race.

Before exposure to additional detail on threats to student privacy, parents have varying levels of concern about privacy and the security of student data and information collected by schools...

Male	68%
Female	55%
<$100K	60%
$100K+	66%
Rural	56%
Suburban	60%
Urban	70%
White	59%
Hispanic	66%
Af-Am	67%

Total: **62%**

Proactively communicate with and engage parents regarding student privacy, paying attention to parent diversity.

Parents would benefit from receiving additional information from a trusted source, like the school, on how it is protecting students' privacy. Additionally, school efforts to meaningfully engage parents and guardians, such as by sending home additional information on how their children's privacy is being protected, will be most effective when the communications take into consideration parents' diverse perspectives.
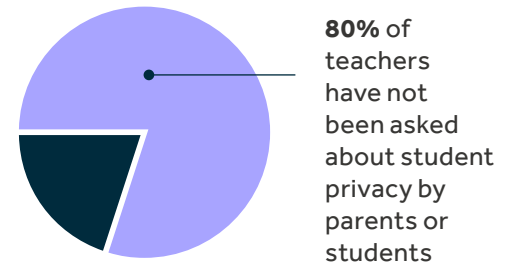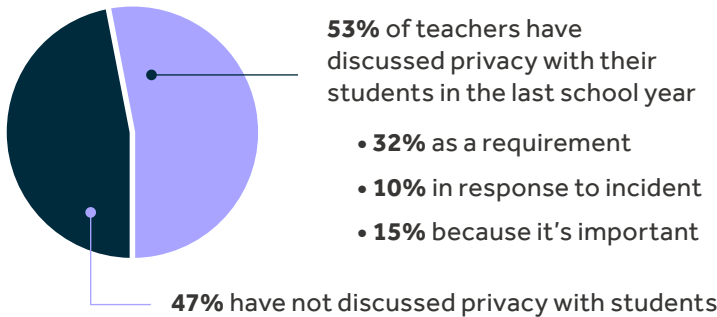
Students: educate and empower

INSIGHTS

Students and teachers diverge in their perceptions of past conversations about how to protect student privacy. Although over half of surveyed teachers reported having discussed privacy protection with their students, students themselves did not recall any previous conversations with teachers (or other adults) on this subject when discussed in focus groups. While not particularly concerned about privacy, some students do acknowledge that they should probably be given more information on this topic.

Introduce privacy protection as a valuable life skill for students.

Parents and teachers can respond to these desires by teaching students more about how to safeguard themselves as a life skill, especially as students age through high school and prepare for young adulthood.

53% of teachers have discussed privacy with their students in the last school year

- **32%** as a requirement
- **10%** in response to incident
- **15%** because it's important

47% have not discussed privacy with students

**80%** of teachers have not been asked about student privacy by parents or students

Teachers: train on student privacy

INSIGHTS

Almost half of teachers have either not received training beyond receiving a form to sign, or have received no training at all. For those that have, it mostly focused on legal compliance, neglecting emerging topics like video conferencing. The need for privacy-focused teacher training and professional development is underscored by the range of privacy issues reported by students in focus groups, which included hacked video conferences as well as exposure of grades and class schedules by teachers who share their screen with the class. Teachers' training needs have become even more urgent during the global pandemic as they are using new technology and have more autonomy.

Although 56% of teachers have received student privacy training beyond signing a form, they are not receiving training on emerging privacy issues . . .

Use group video conferencing — **65%**

Have received privacy training on video conferencing — **19%**

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%
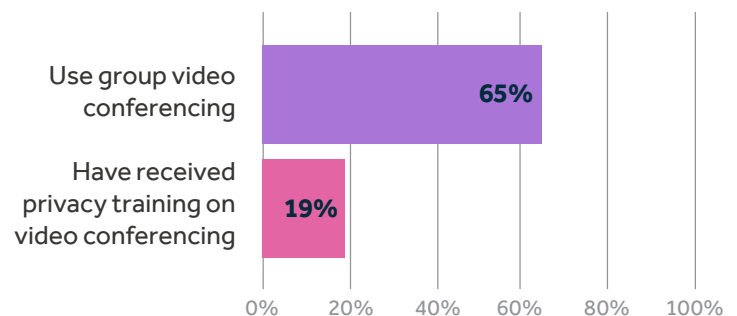
During the pandemic, 86% of teachers have expanded the technology that they are using, 83% of teachers reported having some flexibility when using technology, and 1 in 5 teachers used new technology that had not been approved by the school or district.

Prioritize training teachers on student privacy protection.

With the range of privacy and security incidents regularly happening in schools and the expansion of technology use during the pandemic, teachers urgently need additional training and support to assist them in navigating these issues and protecting students' privacy, safety, and well-being.

"Most of the information is necessary, but the school having my address is concerning. Even though they probably need that, it's concerning. Just having adults knowing where I live is creepy."
— High School Student

3 | Close the digital divide while protecting privacy

INSIGHTS

Students' access to dedicated devices and reliable internet access varies significantly across income levels. To respond to these inequities — a part of the broader digital divide — teachers report that during the pandemic, schools provided tablets, laptops, or Chromebooks at twice the rate they did prior to the pandemic, jumping from 43% to 86%, an illustration of schools' attempts to close disparities in digital access.

Device and internet access for schoolwork varies at home . . .

	<$50K	$50-100K	$100K+
A computer or tablet used only by your child (not shared with others)	59%	73%	73%
Consistent, reliable access to the internet at home	68%	79%	78%

Despite these efforts, 81% of teachers report being aware of subsidized internet offered in their district compared to 59% of parents, with a greater share of parents not sure about whether the school system provides subsidized internet access (25% vs. 10%).

Advance increased access to internet and devices while minimizing threats to student privacy.

As schools provide more devices as well as facilitate internet access, they must also ensure they are not violating student privacy. They should minimize data collection, activity tracking, and ensure that any data sharing complies with state laws and cannot be misused to limit opportunities for students or otherwise harm them. Additionally, policymakers and practitioners not only need to make internet and device access easier, but also need strong communications to ensure that families are aware of these opportunities.

INSIGHTS

Certain teachers do report greater-than-average knowledge of student privacy issues, including increased awareness, more training, and more discussions with parents and students. This is particularly true of teachers who work in schools with a technology plan or are special educators themselves. Most schools have students with disabilities in attendance (and therefore employ special education teachers), and the majority of all teachers surveyed (6 in 10) report that their school has a technology plan that addresses privacy and security.
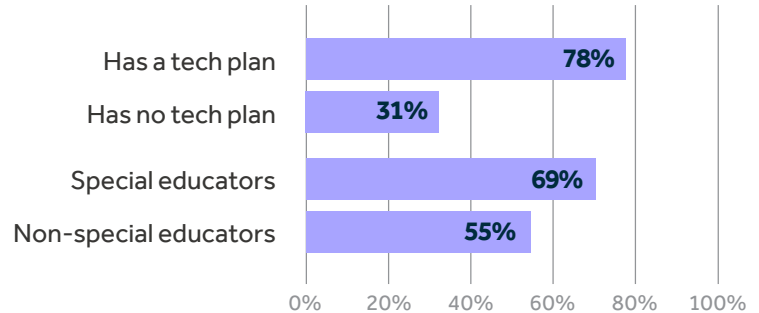
ACTION

Study and implement existing student privacy protection best practices.

This suggests that promising student privacy practices are likely already occurring in most schools, which policymakers and practitioners could analyze, scale, and implement for all schools and teachers, rather than starting from scratch.
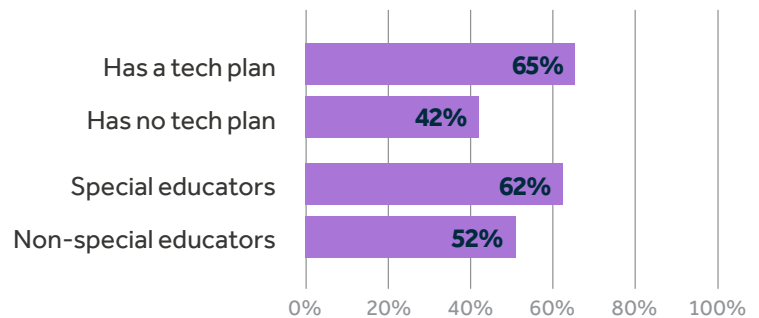
"I look at [student privacy] as common sense, and you take care of the kids as you would your own child."

— 6th-10th Grade Teacher

Teachers who work in schools with technology plans or are special educators themselves have increased **awareness** of student data privacy policies and procedures . . .

Has a tech plan	78%
Has no tech plan	31%
Special educators	69%
Non-special educators	55%

. . . more **training** in student data privacy policies and procedures . . .

Has a tech plan	65%
Has no tech plan	42%
Special educators	62%
Non-special educators	52%

. . . and more **discussions** with students about data privacy policies and procedures . . .

Has a tech plan	65%
Has no tech plan	36%
Special educators	61%
Non-special educators	50%
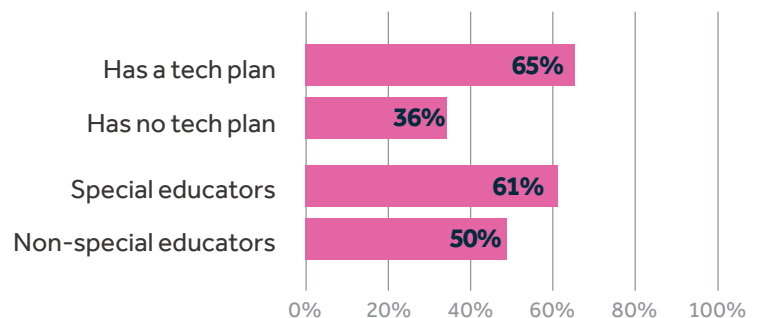
Although parents, teachers, and students have different views on data, technology, and privacy, engaging, educating, and empowering them is critical to ensuring the effective and responsible use of data and technology. Privacy is more than a legal obligation and requires that policymakers and practitioners keep students as safe online as they would be in person. To learn more about student privacy, including underrepresented voices, more in-depth data, and additional COVID-19 implications, visit **cdt.org/area-of-focus/privacy-data/student-privacy/**.