

School Surveillance and COVID-19

As the coronavirus pandemic continues, schools are employing technology to help protect students who are learning in-person. That technology might screen for coronavirus symptoms at particular places or times, continuously monitor students' location or health, or share data with local health departments. Each strategy requires measures to protect student privacy.



Screening for COVID-19 at Particular Places or Times

Schools are collecting data from students and staff at particular places or times to monitor outbreaks on campus. For example, the Dallas Independent School District requires students to have their temperature taken daily by non-contact thermometers or specially equipped metal detectors.¹ At Creighton University, students were required to have temperatures checked by thermal imaging kiosks and to complete a symptom questionnaire through a campus app, which provided a “green pass” for entering campus buildings if the students were symptom free.²



Continuous Monitoring and Data Collection

Other technologies do not collect data at particular times or places, but continuously. At the K-12 level, schools have implemented repurposed facial recognition technology to monitor student temperatures throughout the day.³ Other institutions have proposed the use of wearable Bluetooth technology to monitor students' temperatures or Bluetooth beacons installed around the school to track students' locations and proximity to one another.⁴

Some universities have proposed using logs of Wi-Fi access points used by students to help monitor students' proximity to one another for contact tracing.⁵ Albion College in Michigan required students to install a smartphone app that utilized GPS tracking for contact tracing and alerted administrators if students left a defined area; the college has stated that location data was accessed only in response to positive cases or if a student leaves approved areas.⁶



Sharing Data With Other Entities

Schools are also sharing information with health agencies to assist in contact tracing and testing, to better understand inequities faced by students, and to ensure both the physical and emotional health of their students. For example, in Dallas, the school district will notify the Dallas County Health Department of positive cases.⁷ Similarly, Albion College requires students to sign consent forms to allow data sharing with a laboratory and the county health department, and Columbia University planned to share positive COVID-19 tests with the New York City Department of Health “per regulatory requirements” for contact tracing.⁸



Impact on Equity

Many of the technologies being considered or used by schools as part of their COVID-19 response may have a [disproportionate impact](#) on students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and students of color. For example, Bluetooth proximity tracking may depend on students' access to smartphones, and electronic passes to enter campus buildings may present accessibility issues. Likewise, facial recognition software has been demonstrated to be less accurate for people of color, especially for Black people.⁹ Thermal imaging may falsely flag students with chronic conditions or disabilities that cause elevated temperatures.¹⁰



Considerations and Emerging Practices

Schools should consider the following in developing solutions for privacy and equity risks:

- **Consider equity:** Account for the invasiveness, effectiveness, cost, and potential discriminatory effects of certain technologies, especially on students of color and students with disabilities.
- **Community engagement:** Involve students and families in the decision-making process about how health data is collected and shared to ensure that schools meet the needs of students of color, with disabilities, or from lower income backgrounds.
- **Legal compliance:** Collect, use, and share student data as required or limited by federal and state law, including the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).
- **Data governance:** Establish formal data governance structures for making decisions about COVID-related data, ensuring that all the necessary voices are heard and setting data collection goals, access and use limitations, and deletion plans.

This two-pager is one of a series designed to give practitioners clear, actionable guidance on how to most responsibly use technology in support of students. Find out more at cdt.org/student-privacy.



Endnotes

1. Dallas ISD, [Student Check-In at Campus Metal Detectors](#) (last visited Dec. 9, 2020).
2. Creighton University, [Caring for Our Creighton Community](#) at 12 (Aug. 31, 2020).
3. The Meadows School, [Remark Holdings Helps Students Safely Return to the Meadows School](#) (Aug. 11, 2020); Rebecca Heilweil, [The Dystopian Tech that Companies Are Selling to Help Schools Reopen Sooner](#), Recode (Aug. 14, 2020).
4. Butler School District, [2020-2021 School Restart and Recovery Plan](#) (last visited Dec. 9, 2020); Will Knight, [Schools Turn to Surveillance Tech to Prevent Covid-19 Spread](#), Wired (June 5, 2020).
5. Duke University, [Data Usage During COVID-19](#) (last visited Dec. 9, 2020); Harvard University, [How TraceFi Works](#) (last visited Dec. 9, 2020); University of California, Irvine, [UCI Researchers Use Campus as Test Bed for Coronavirus Contact Tracing System](#) (July 8, 2020).
6. Albion College, [Together Safely FAQ](#) (last visited December 9, 2020).
7. Dallas ISD, [COVID Positive Reporting Steps](#) (last visited Dec. 9, 2020).
8. Columbia University, [Testing, Tracing, Quarantine, and Isolation](#) (last visited Dec. 14, 2020).
9. Sophie Bushwick, [How NIST Tested Facial Recognition Algorithms for Racial Bias](#) (Dec. 27, 2019).
10. See Food & Drug Administration, [Non-contact Temperature Assessment Devices During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (June 19, 2020).