Teachers & Parents of Students with Disabilities Leading Community Engagement Practices

Robust community engagement is an important step in school technology decision-making. As CDT has previously discussed, these practices help ensure that new technologies meet the needs of all students, while protecting their privacy and keeping them safe online. Yet many K-12 parents feel left out of the loop in school technology decisions, and less than half report that their school has actually asked for their input on how it should be using technology. The need for improved tech-related community engagement is critical.

Despite these shortcomings, one group within school communities stands out for its positive community engagement practices: teachers and parents of students with disabilities. CDT's recent survey research shows that these teachers and parents are doing more and better community engagement than their peers on several key metrics. Unsurprisingly, these groups also report feeling better equipped to navigate data and privacy decisions, reinforcing the idea that strong community engagement promotes safer and smarter technology use.

These findings build on previous CDT research, which found that teachers of students with disabilities demonstrate particularly high familiarity with privacy protection principles and other aspects of responsible technology use. These encouraging trends suggest that broader school communities stand to benefit by learning lessons from the successes of individuals who support students with disabilities.

Below, this brief examines the positive community engagement practices demonstrated by teachers and parents of students with disabilities, and discusses how these practices can serve as a model for other members of the education community.

Teachers of students with disabilities report more privacy-related conversations.

Teachers of students with disabilities report more conversations about student privacy with students and their parents than other teachers do. **89 percent** of teachers of students with disabilities report discussing issues of student privacy protection with their students; by comparison, just **68 percent** of other teachers reported having these conversations with their students.

Teachers of students with disabilities are also more likely to report that their students and students' parents have asked about privacy-related issues:
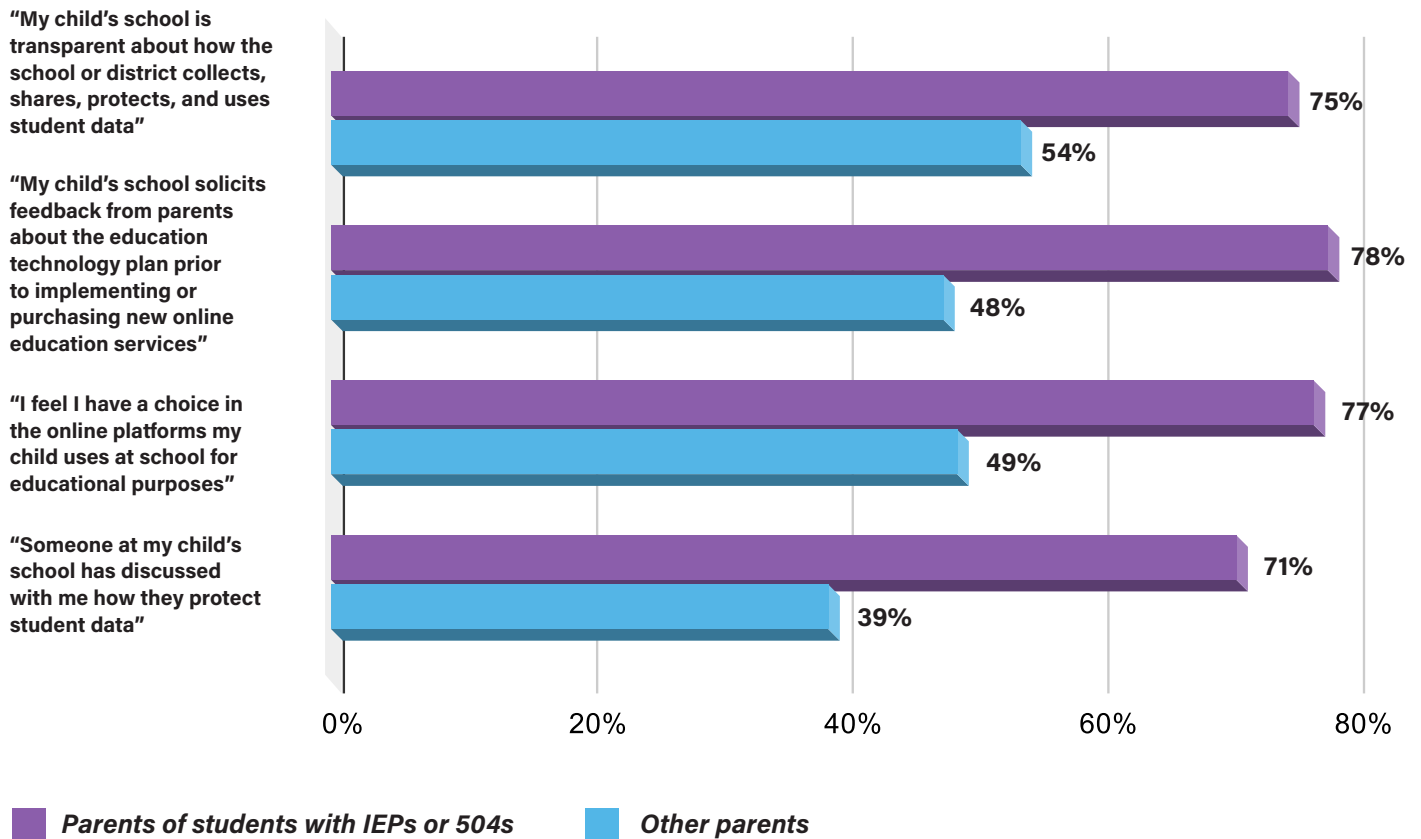
Teachers who:

Report that parents asked about student privacy
46%
22%

Report that students asked about student privacy
36%
14%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40%

■ *Teachers of students with disabilities*   ■ *Other teachers*
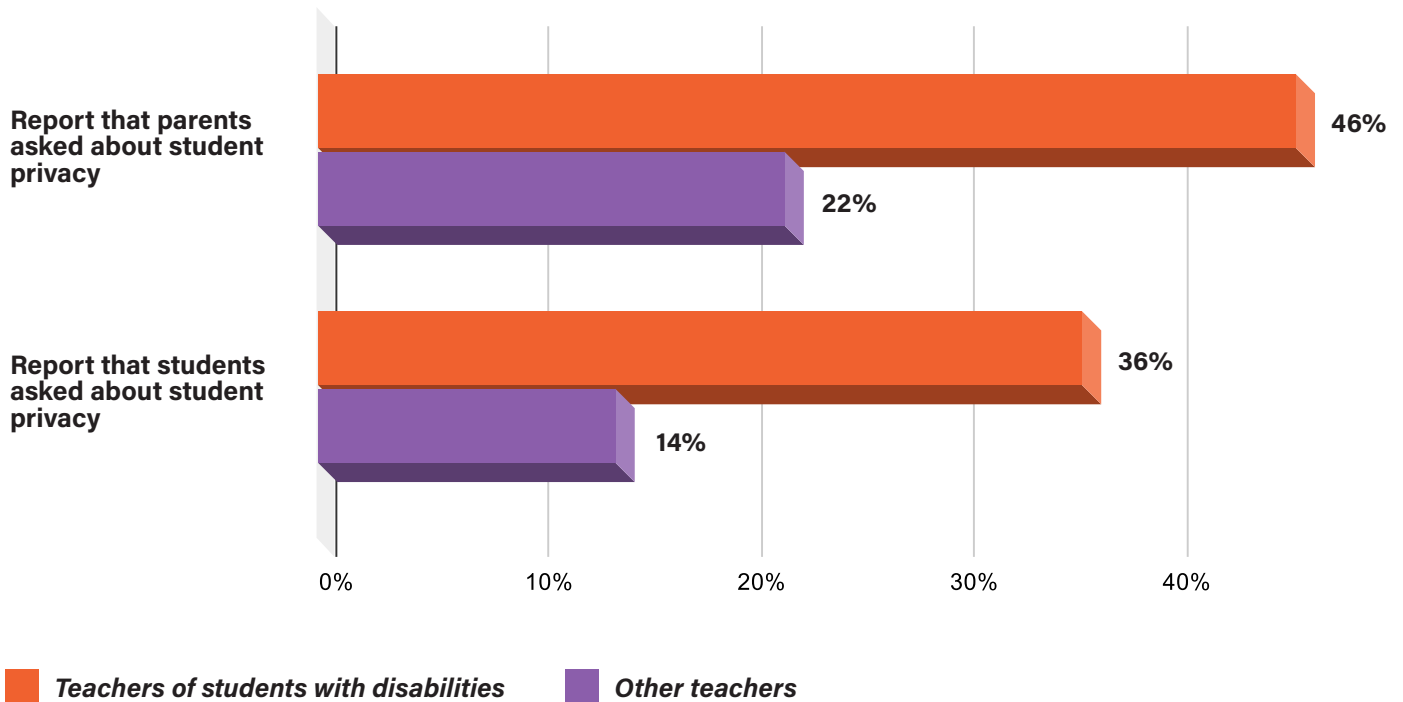
Parents of students with IEPs or 504 plans report more robust engagement from schools.

On issues of technology use and privacy protection, parents of students with IEPs or 504 plans (used to coordinate services for students with disabilities) report dramatically higher rates of engagement with their school than other parents do. Parents' responses suggest that these engagement efforts are robust and bidirectional: schools disseminate information about their technology practices related to students with disabilities, but they also actively solicit feedback on these decisions from parents.

Parents who agree that:

"My child's school is transparent about how the school or district collects, shares, protects, and uses student data"
75%
54%

"My child's school solicits feedback from parents about the education technology plan prior to implementing or purchasing new online education services"
78%
48%

"I feel I have a choice in the online platforms my child uses at school for educational purposes"
77%
49%

"Someone at my child's school has discussed with me how they protect student data"
71%
39%

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%

■ *Parents of students with IEPs or 504s*   ■ *Other parents*

Part of this improved engagement includes the provision of technology training: **83 percent** of parents of students with IEPs or 504s reported that their school had provided them or their children with school-related technology training, compared to just **60 percent** of other parents.

Parents of students with disabilities are better equipped to promote responsible data use.

Given the contrasting experiences of the two parent populations discussed above, one might expect parents of students with IEPs or 504s to be relatively more comfortable with engaging their schools constructively on technology issues. This hypothesis is borne out in parents' survey responses: **51 percent** of parents of students with IEPs or 504s report feeling very prepared to give feedback on schools' decisions about data, technology, and student privacy, compared to just **35 percent** of other parents. Moreover, **53 percent** of parents of students with IEPs or 504s feel very prepared to educate their children about how to safely, securely, and responsibly use online tools, compared to just **40 percent** of other parents.

Together, these findings suggest that parents of students with disabilities may possess a higher degree of digital literacy than other parents, and that this is likely related to their engagement with their children's schools.

Conclusion

These research findings tell a consistent story: individuals that support students with disabilities are more likely to practice productive engagement strategies than their peers. Survey responses suggest that these practices are bidirectional (both teachers and parents contribute to driving the conversation) and have the power to impact school decisions. Similarly, teachers and parents of students with disabilities have a meaningfully higher capacity to understand and navigate privacy concerns, which results in a safer online learning environment for students.

These findings point to the benefits of community engagement for protecting student privacy and ensuring that school technology meets the needs of students who use it. As schools seek to cultivate stronger privacy protection practices throughout their general population, they should celebrate the successful practices of teachers of students with disabilities and consider how to implement them elsewhere.

For a closer look at other research findings from CDT's recent survey research, see CDT's report, _Navigating the New Normal: Ensuring Equitable and Trustworthy EdTech for the Future_.