

Hidden Harms: Students With Disabilities, Mental Health, And Student Activity Monitoring

Schools rely on technology to provide instruction, coordinate services, and, increasingly, monitor students' online activity. These technology applications raise privacy and equity concerns, which can fall disproportionately on certain groups of students. Students with disabilities are one such group. Prior CDT research found that technology used to enforce school disciplinary policy can exacerbate long-standing disparities in disciplinary action against students with disabilities.¹

Additional research also suggests that student activity monitoring has a chilling effect on the willingness of students with disabilities to express their thoughts and feelings online, which adversely affects mental health.² At the same time, not all students have negative experiences with school technologies.³ Students with disabilities, and their surrounding communities, often serve as exemplars of positive community engagement practices that the broader student population would benefit from adopting.

This paper expands upon prior research on students with disabilities' experiences with school technology, with an emphasis on student activity monitoring and mental health implications.⁴ Two main findings emerge from this research:

- Students with disabilities and their communities emphasize privacy protection.
- Student activity monitoring poses disproportionate risk to students with disabilities.

1 Grant-Chapman, Hugh, [Tech for School Discipline? Parents and Teachers of Students with Disabilities Express Concerns](#), *Center for Democracy & Technology* (March 2022).

2 Quay-de la Vallee, Hannah, [The Chilling Effect of Student Monitoring: Disproportionate Impacts and Mental Health Risks](#), *Center for Democracy & Technology* (May 2022).

3 Grant-Chapman, Hugh, [Teachers and Parents of Students with Disabilities Leading Community Engagement Practices](#), *Center for Democracy & Technology* (April 2022).

4 To understand the distinct experiences of students with disabilities, this research contrasts responses from high school students who report having a physical disability or learning difference versus those who do not. In addition, the research contrasts middle and high school teachers of students with disabilities versus strictly general education teachers, as well as responses from parents of middle and high school students with [Individualized Education Programs \(IEPs\) or 504 plans \(504s\)](#), two kinds of plans used to coordinate formal supports for students with disabilities or who need additional support for school.

Engaging With Mental Health At School

Stakeholders are increasingly cognizant that technology use can produce unintended mental health impacts. Students themselves are no exception: **78 percent** of students indicate they would find it helpful to “learn about ways to minimize negative impacts of technology use, such as reducing mental health impacts, negative self-image, cyberbullying, and balancing screen time with off-screen time.” This indicates that there is room for improvement for schools to provide targeted support.

While this report focuses on the use of student activity monitoring to respond to student mental health needs, it is certainly not the only strategy in play. Schools also use surveys, for example, to gain insight into the kinds of mental health or other supports that would be most valuable to their student bodies.⁵ These surveys do not come without concern, however: **58 percent** of teachers, **60 percent** of parents, and **46 percent** of students express concern with their use, even when the results are not linked to individual students.

Students with disabilities and their communities emphasize privacy protection.

Elevated concern about student privacy

Across several dimensions, students with disabilities, their parents, and their teachers demonstrate higher regard than their peers for protecting student data and preserving privacy. **68 percent** of parents whose children use Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or 504 plans report being concerned about the privacy and security of their child’s school data, compared to **58 percent** of parents of students who don’t use these programs. The difference in teacher groups is even more striking: **51 percent** of teachers of students with disabilities but only 34 percent of general education teachers report being worried about privacy and security issues.

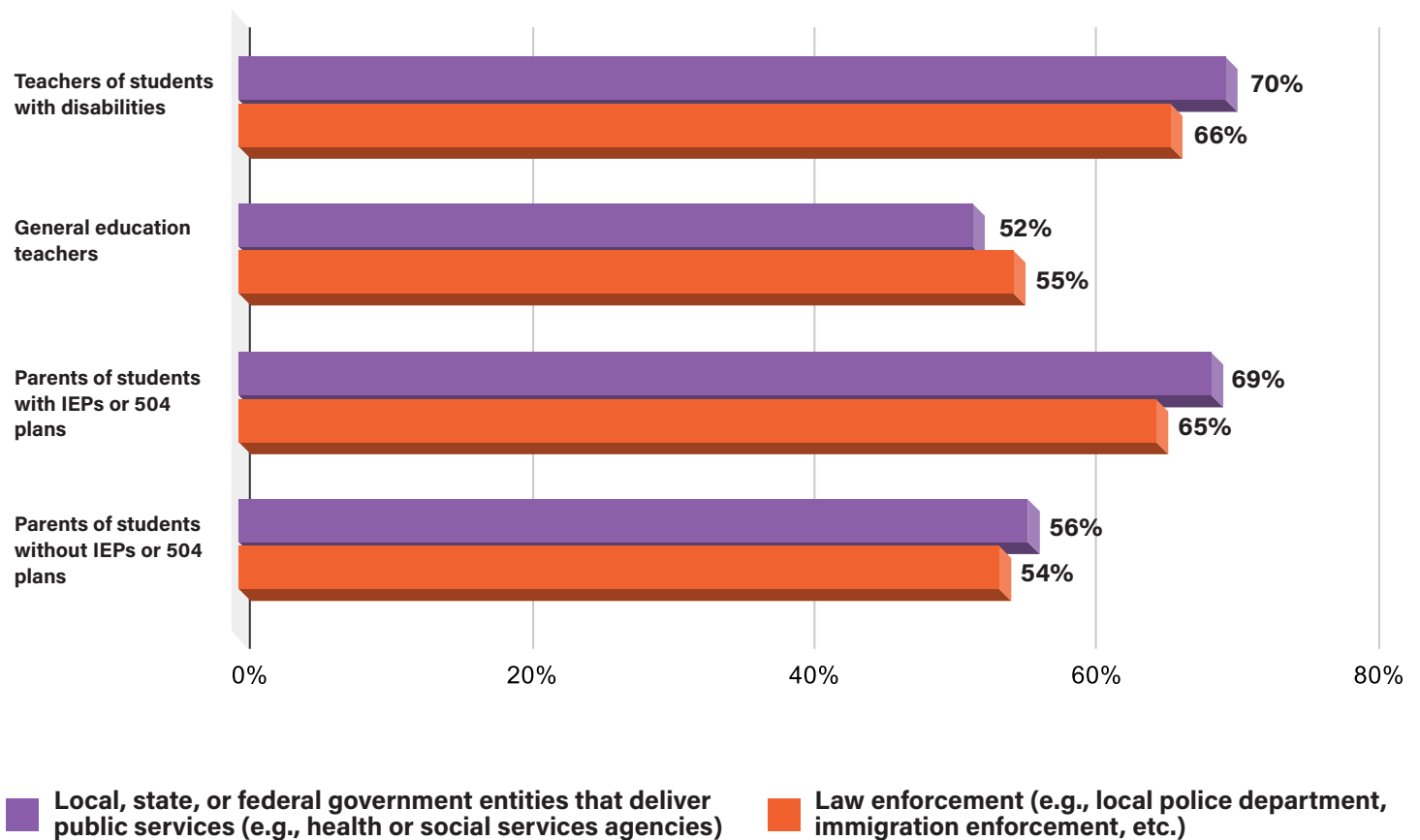
When students themselves were asked about privacy concerns, **69 percent** of students with learning differences expressed concern versus **54 percent** of students without reported learning differences. Students with physical disabilities, however, did not report statistically significantly different levels of privacy concerns compared to other students: **65 percent** of students with

5 Quay-de la Vallee, Hannah, [Preserving Student Privacy and Well-Being When Conducting Mental Health Surveys](#), *Center for Democracy & Technology* (May 2022).

physical disabilities and **56 percent** of students without physical disabilities expressed concern. Further research would be needed to understand what drives these differing responses, but these findings do indicate that at least for students with learning differences, concern about student privacy issues is elevated.

The concerns of teachers and parents of students with disabilities (including physical disabilities or learning differences) extend to sharing student information with agencies outside of schools, some of which are involved in responding to student safety issues. Varying proportions of teachers and parents expressed concern about student data being shared with local, state, or federal government entities that deliver public services (e.g., health or social services agencies), as well as law enforcement (including immigration enforcement, etc.).

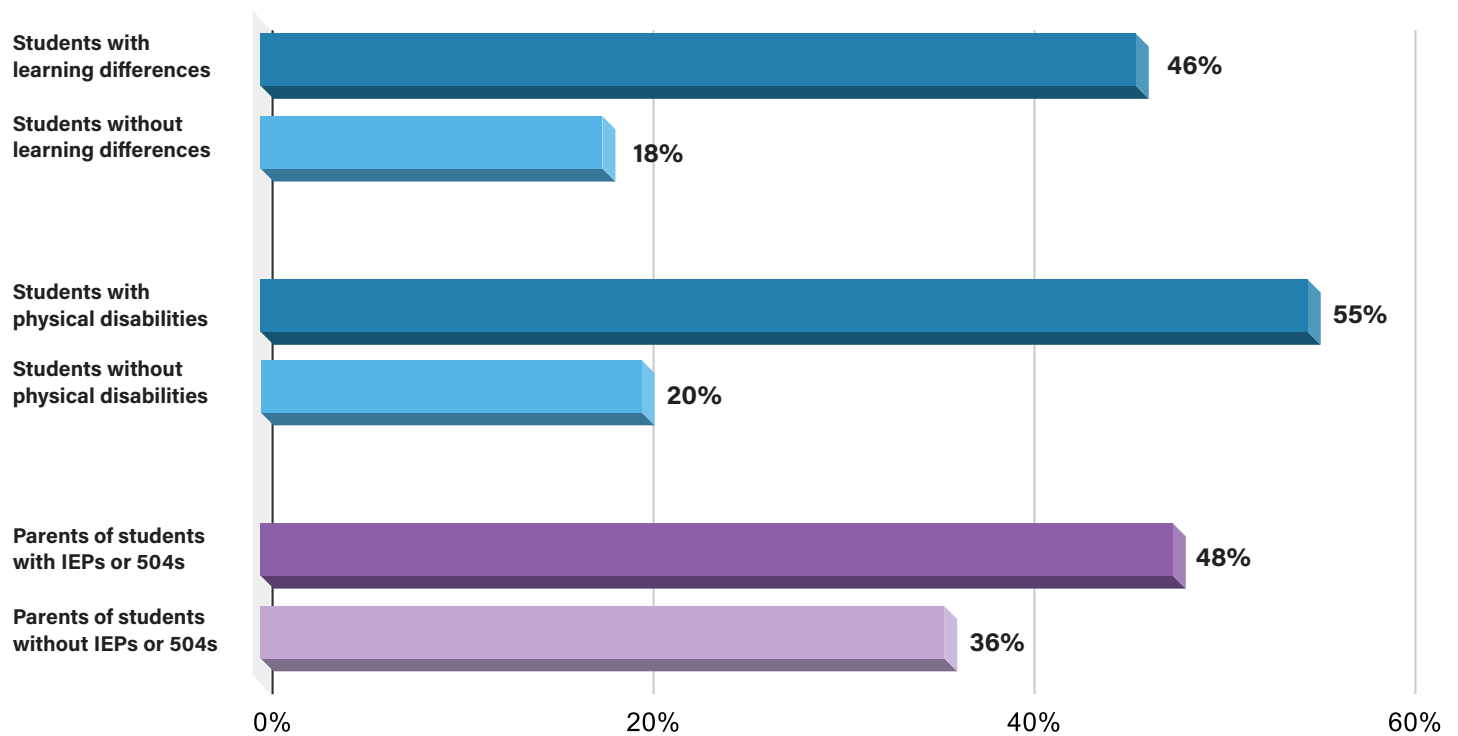
Concern regarding sharing student data with external stakeholders:



Strong community engagement practices on privacy and technology

A bright spot revealed by the research is that students with disabilities and their parents consistently report higher levels of engagement from their school on technology and privacy issues. When asked whether “my school or school district asked for my input to inform how it privately and securely uses student data and technology,” students with physical disabilities and learning differences, and their parents, were more likely to agree.

School asked for input on data and tech use:



Parents of students with disabilities also report more engagement from schools and, not surprisingly, greater capacity to address student privacy-related issues. For example, **87 percent** of parents of students with IEPs or 504 plans feel prepared to educate their children about digital literacy, compared to **81 percent** of other parents.

A similar trend exists for teachers of students with disabilities. **91 percent** of teachers of students with disabilities report having discussed data privacy with students at some point in the past year, compared to **70 percent** of general education teachers. This could be driven in part by efforts to build capacity, in that **81 percent** of teachers of students with disabilities report receiving substantive training on student data privacy policies and procedures, compared to only **62 percent** of general education teachers.

Student activity monitoring poses disproportionate risk to students with disabilities.

Many of the technologies that impact students with disabilities are used with the stated goal of supporting student mental health. For example, as CDT's previous research found, student activity monitoring software is often implemented with the intent of identifying and assisting students struggling with mental health issues.⁶ Parents and students generally support this goal — approximately **7 in 10** parents and students are comfortable with student activity monitoring to identify students at risk of self-harm or other mental health crises.

In spite of these goals, however, student activity monitoring itself may be adversely impacting students' mental health. Per CDT's recent research, approximately **5 in 10** students agree that they do not share their true thoughts or ideas because they know what they do online may be monitored.⁷ This chilling effect on students' free expression online can tax mental health and limit students' ability to seek self-care resources online.⁸

Student and teacher survey responses suggest that students with disabilities are at greater risk than other students of being harmed by irresponsible use of these tools, as this report discusses.

Suppressed thoughts and feelings

Students with learning differences and physical disabilities are particularly discouraged from expressing themselves online when they know they are being monitored. **65 percent** of students with physical disabilities and **61 percent** of students with learning differences report

6 Hankerson, DeVan *et al.*, [Online and Observed: Student Privacy Implications of School-Issued Devices and Student Activity Monitoring Software](#), *Center for Democracy & Technology* (September 2021).

7 Laird, Elizabeth *et al.*, [Hidden Harms: The Misleading Promise of Monitoring Students Online](#), *Center for Democracy & Technology* (August 2022).

8 Quay-de la Vallee, Hannah, [The Chilling Effect of Student Monitoring: Disproportionate Impacts and Mental Health Risks](#), *Center for Democracy & Technology* (May 2022).

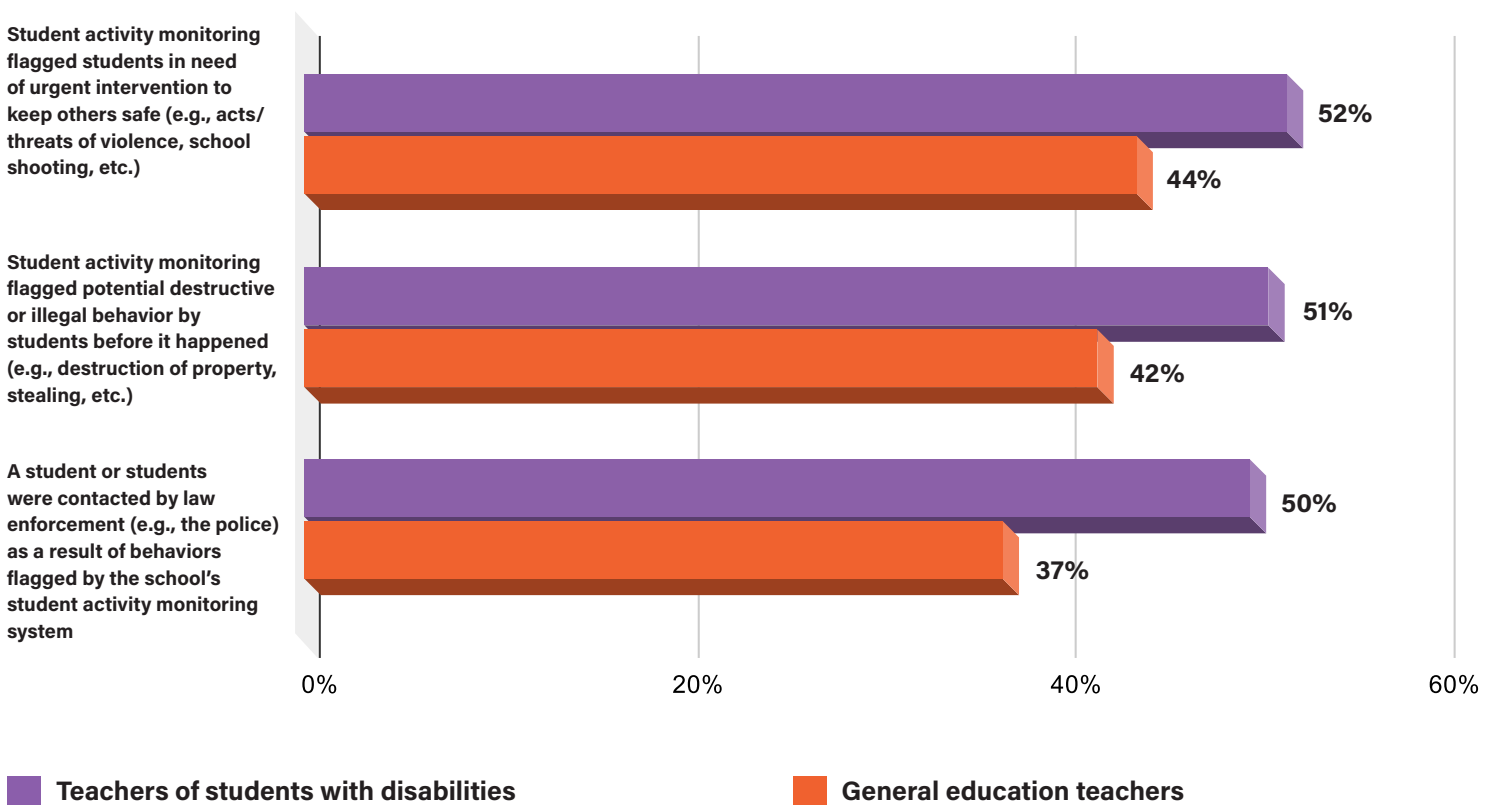
that they do not share their true thoughts or ideas online because they know what they do online may be monitored, compared to **44 percent** of students without physical disabilities and **43 percent** of students without learning differences, respectively. This suggests students with learning differences or physical disabilities may be especially prone to adverse negative mental health impacts from constrained free expression.

Biased actions

Greater proportions of teachers of students with disabilities report that student activity monitoring flagged students in need of urgent intervention to keep others safe, flagged potential destructive or illegal behavior by students before it happened, or a student / students were contacted by law enforcement as a result of behaviors flagged by the school's student activity monitoring system.

These factors risk exacerbating the longstanding track record of schools disproportionately disciplining students with disabilities.⁹ The discrepancy in law enforcement involvement is particularly alarming, given that law enforcement interaction risks escalating incidents and infringing on privacy by retaining student data.

Student activity monitoring alerts:



⁹ [K-12 Education: Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities](#), U.S. General Accountability Office (March 2018).

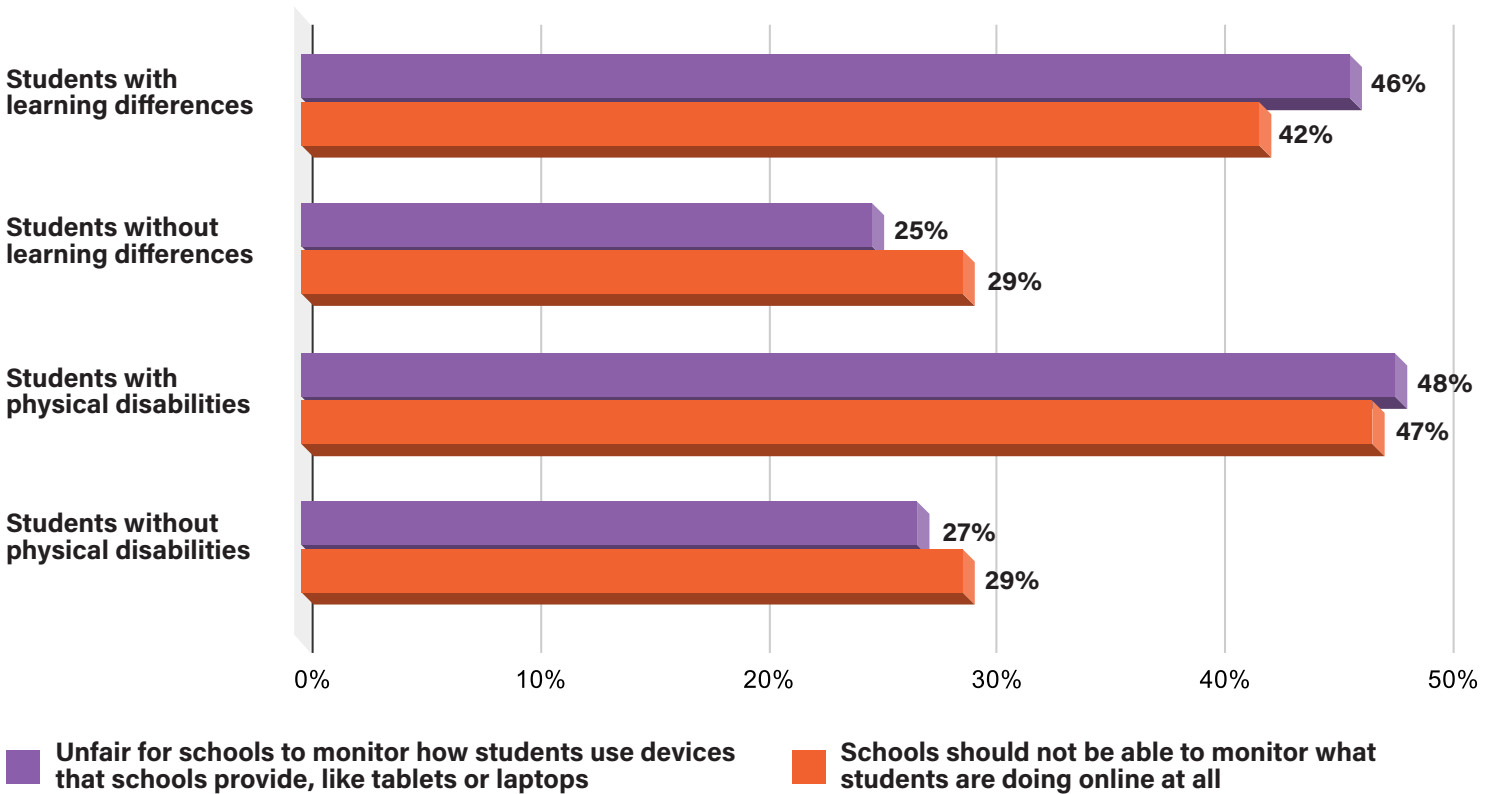
Increased alerts

Teachers of students with disabilities also report receiving more frequent flags from student activity monitoring compared to other teachers. **48 percent** of teachers of students with disabilities report an alert at least once a week; only **32 percent** of other teachers reported a corresponding frequency of alerts. Teachers of students with disabilities face greater responsibilities for supporting monitoring systems, with **43 percent** reporting they are responsible for responding to mental health-related flags compared to **27 percent** of other teachers.

Higher levels of concern

Students with physical disabilities or learning differences and their teachers alike express disproportionately high concerns about the use of student activity monitoring. In the case of students, agreement diverges sharply across dimensions.

Concerns about use of student activity monitoring:



Similarly, **72 percent** of teachers of students with disabilities are concerned about student activity monitoring in general compared to **51 percent** of other teachers.

In contrast to these findings, however, parents of students with disabilities are generally more supportive of student activity monitoring than their peers. **70 percent** of parents of students with IEPs or 504s agree that the benefits of student activity monitoring outweigh concerns about student privacy, compared to **60 percent** of other parents. Yet even though the benefits of student activity monitoring are acknowledged by parents of students with disabilities, the risks of this technology do not go unnoticed: **65 percent** of parents of students with IEPs or 504s expressed concern about the use of student activity monitoring.

Conclusion

The research findings discussed above are an important reminder that technology impacts different students in different ways. As a result, the needs of all students should be considered when making technology-related decisions. Students with disabilities are at risk of disproportionate harm from student activity monitoring.

These risks can be mitigated by reconsidering how, or whether, to implement student activity monitoring tools — a fact recently recognized by the U.S. Department of Education when it included the use of “surveillance technologies” among the practices that may run afoul of schools’ non-discrimination obligations.¹⁰ Schools and districts should take action now to avoid exacerbating inequities for this community of students.





¹⁰ Supporting Students with Disabilities and Avoiding the Discriminatory Use of Student Discipline under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, U.S. Department of Education at 3 (July 2022).

**For more information
from this research, see
CDT's recent report on
the promises and perils
of student activity
monitoring software,
*Hidden Harms.***

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