

Student digital privacy protections welcomed by parents, teachers

By [Vikki Ortiz Healy](#) Chicago Tribune [contact the reporter](#)

When Courtney Lorentz's 6-year-old daughter brought home an iPad from school last fall, the Deerfield mom wanted assurance that the thoughts, ideas and personal information her daughter typed into the device would not follow her for years to come — or be sold to marketing companies for a quick buck.

"I wanted to figure out how I could let her participate in first grade without her information being collected by third parties who have no business in her education," Lorentz said.

But when she took her concerns to School District 109 officials, educators acknowledged they were new to digital data privacy concerns and assembled a team of attorneys, administrators and community relations experts to verse them on the subject.

"We would not have had this conversation several years ago," said Superintendent Michael Lubelfeld, who ultimately worked with Lorentz to get an anonymous ID for her daughter to use on the iPad instead of using her real name, as other students do. The school district is considering similar measures for all children in the 3,100-student district next year.

"I think it's healthy and important for us to engage in this dialogue," Lubelfeld said.

As the use of technology in schools explodes, administrators, parents and child safety advocates in the Chicago area say they welcome President Barack Obama's cybersecurity proposals, including a Student Digital Privacy Act, which are expected to be mentioned in his State of the Union speech Tuesday.

In remarks last week, the president proposed legislation, modeled after a California statute, that would make it illegal for companies to sell student data to third parties for noneducational purposes. It would ban companies from using targeted advertising based on data collected in schools.

"President Obama is acknowledging this whole movement in the country to increase digital transformation in our schools," Lubelfeld said. "It always helps to have people in such a high profile take a stand in helping to protect the interest of children."

In recent years, educators in the Chicago area and across the country have embraced new teaching technology that makes it possible for students to chat live with astronauts at the International Space Station, for example, or learn basic arithmetic with programs that track what they get stumped on so their exercises can be tailored to help them.

While there are benefits to digital tools, there are potential pitfalls too.

Some technology requires teachers or students to enter all sorts of data — from names to grades to personality traits — thus raising questions that educators had not faced before: Will information a teacher or child shares stay available in cyberspace with the potential to be brought up years later by college admissions officers or employers?

There are concerns about software companies selling data provided by students to marketing groups interested in targeted advertising. And educators and parents worry that personal information — grades, a child's GPS location, details about a student's disability — could get into the wrong hands.

"We are really in the Wild West when it comes to student information," said Khaliah Barnes, director of the Student Privacy Project for the Electronic Privacy Information Center in Washington, which has long pushed for national protections. "We've had some members of school districts say, 'Hey, we need more guidance.'"

Obama announced that he is asking educational technology companies to sign a pledge offering protections against the misuse of student data. As of Monday, more than 85 companies had signed it. And he's called for the federal Department of Education to provide teacher training on student digital privacy.

Since the early 1970s, student privacy has been protected in Illinois through the federal Family and Educational Rights Privacy Act, which requires schools to have written permission from parents to release any information in student records — with limited exceptions. Additionally, the Illinois School Student Records Act makes it illegal for schools to release student records without consent.

But technological advances are outpacing existing protections, often leaving administrators in the dark.

"There's a lot of great applications that can really help teachers teach," said Tony Inglese, chief information officer for Batavia Public School District 101. But administrators "don't even know the data has been shared, let alone which service has been used."

At Elgin School District U-46, administrators recognized the potential risks. This year the district revamped its policies to require that all technology — including free apps available online — be vetted by a central office before it can be used in a classroom.

The district has examined its contracts with technology companies such as Apple and Google to be sure the companies are not building profiles of students based on their Internet searches — a practice commonly used with the general public to allow targeted advertising. Apple and Google are among the companies that signed the K-12 School Service Provider Pledge to Safeguard Student Privacy.

District U-46 also is offering teacher training to help educators understand the importance of student data privacy, said Craig Williams, the district's director of information services.

"The basic premise is, 'Think about this when you're doing it.' Yes, it's great, and using social media and getting students to corroborate is great. But don't be blind to the potential pitfalls and social implications," Williams said.

Similarly, in Chicago Public Schools, administrators have begun reviewing language in vendor contracts to make sure the unauthorized use of student data is prohibited. CPS also considers each vendor's track record and ability to protect student data when evaluating potential technology vendors, according to district spokesman Bill McCaffrey.

"The district has taken steps to prevent the improper use of student information, and we are supportive of measures that strengthen protections," McCaffrey said in a statement.

In Plainfield Community Consolidated School District 202, administrators carefully examined contracts with two vendors, Blackboard and SunGard, before bringing the technology to classrooms. Neither of those companies was included on the pledge as of Monday.

Teachers use Blackboard to create websites for each of their classrooms, where students and parents can go to view student photographs, classroom work or the class calendar, among other things.

SunGard allows teachers to post students' grades in a place where parents can regularly check in to see how they're doing, according to District 202 spokesman Tom Hernandez.

"If there are additional layers of protection, any and all help is welcome and appreciated because we are dealing with the most sensitive information out there — that which deals with minors," Hernandez said.

Recognizing how important it is to have conversations about student data safety, Inglese, from the Batavia school district, recently began working with Williams of the Elgin school district to hold workshops on the subject for principals, superintendents, teachers, business managers and technology staff from schools across the Chicago area.

At the workshops, Inglese and Williams urge educators to be vigilant about vetting software companies with legal, technological and educational teams before allowing programs to be used by students, Inglese said.

But even after taking those extra steps, students may be vulnerable, he added.

"The only way to have it completely safe is to lock (computers) up and not let anybody access them," he said.

Still, Lorentz, the mother in Deerfield, said she felt better knowing that more people, including the president, are demanding more protections for children.

"I would love for this to become a big issue," Lorentz said. "Ultimately children should be allowed to learn and grow without their past mistakes coming back to haunt them."