

Protecting student data in the age of the voracious, everywhere internet

A new bill works the space between the urge to embrace educational technology and the practice of turning students into focus groups for marketing companies

Tessa Cheek

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I learned to type in 1996 on a computer game called "Typing with Timon and Pumbaa." You squashed grubs by hitting the right keys at the right time in the right order with your fingers. Everyone in class, including the teacher, was addicted to playing the game. The game's rudimentary home screen listed top scores by user, so everyone in class knew who was picking up typing quick and who was still hunting and pecking.

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A lot has changed since then. Technology has advanced into every corner of education, from tablets in the classroom to the laptops kids use to complete homework. And here's a big change: In 1996, everyone in class had access to their peer's typing stats, but Disney Interactive, the software company responsible for our fabulous typing adventures, did not. The game came on a CD. We played on computers unconnected to the internet.

Today, education, like everything else, is networked. Students download learning materials and modules from applications manufactured and operated by companies like Google and Apple. While learning to type, students are producing data as they go — on topics like effective learning strategies and generational tastes.

Researchers see the data as enormously powerful. One in seven schools nationwide now use a data analytics program from MIT called BrightBytes, which "links the implementation of classroom technologies, and other strategies, to student achievement."

Of course, networked learning and data gathering has raised concern among parents and privacy advocates. Last year, the legislature passed a law to protect data collected by the Colorado Department of Education. This year lawmakers are working to protect the student data channeled from the schools into the offices of private companies.

"Learning practices have changed. We do more learning on our computers and phones than almost anywhere else as adults and it's no different for children," said Rep. Dan Pabon, D-Denver. "We have to recognize that with the usage of all this technology there are some basic side rails needed to protect students from having their data misappropriated."

Pabon is co-sponsoring SB 173 with Parker Republican Sen. Chris Holbert. The bill, which will hit the Senate Education Committee this Thursday, aims to define student data not just by content but by context (who should be able to use it and why). The measure is designed to prevent third-party companies from selling student data without driving tech companies out of Colorado.

Holbert says the issue plays into parental rights, a major conversation at the Capitol this year. Parents want to know what kind of data private companies are collecting on their kids and for what purpose. They also want an amendment to the bill that would allow them to make companies stop collecting, and even purge, their child's data.

Pabon calls the policy a scalpel; Holbert calls it a threading needle. Either way, it plays in the narrow space stretched between the urge to embrace educational technology and the practice of turning students into de facto focus groups for marketing companies.

"We need to realize that if you walk across a sandy beach, we can't just pass a bill that says, 'You can't see the footprints in the sand.' That's not the way the internet works. If you go to a website, if you bounce around from one place to another, that's inherently part of the internet and it isn't that someone's necessarily tracking you, but that data could be found," said Holbert. "With SB 173 we're asking vendors not to collect that kind of data, not sell that kind of data."

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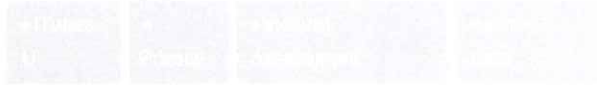
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The bill would see the Department of Education become a clearing house for student data privacy complaints. Department staff will look for patterns of abuse and refer complaints to the Attorney General's office for prosecution.

"Parents are concerned that there's not privacy, no space for their children to learn in a protected environment," said Holbert. "That's a risk for our public school system. The people of Colorado pay for our K-12 system, and parents should feel they can trust it."

[Photo by [Brad Flickinger](#)]



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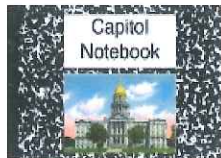
TESSA CHEEK

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