



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on November 4, 2019

Tech Company Quietly Keeps Millions of U.S. Students Under Surveillance

A shocking report [filed by BuzzFeed](#) reveals that one technology company has nearly five million U.S. students under surveillance and additional school districts enroll in the service every day, creating a “sprawling surveillance industrial complex that targets kids who can’t opt out.”

Gaggle is an Illinois-based tech company that began in 1998 as an email client for students. It has since expanded not only its services, but its scope, as well.



The company’s website describes its purpose:

Since the inception of Gaggle as a student email provider in 1998, the company has grown significantly adding products that help schools create safe learning environments. When asked why he chose the name “Gaggle,” Jeff replies: “Our goal was to give teachers an easy way to watch over their gaggle of students.” Jeff’s vision of student-centric schools using cutting-edge technology to safely inspire creativity and ingenuity remains the driving force in Gaggle’s ongoing story.

Why is it that every company or agency that keeps people under surveillance always claims that it’s doing so for the sake of safety?

Gaggle claims to have prevented “722 students from carrying out an act of suicide” in the 2018-2019 school year.

How does Gaggle accomplish this? Again, from the company’s own press release:

“Districts understand that improving students’ mental health is as important as keeping students physically safe on campus. As outlined in this white paper and the upcoming webinar, there are a number of ways in which schools are effectively supporting the well-being of the ‘whole child’ and creating a safe physical and emotional learning environment for all students,” said Patterson. “Day in and day out, we work with districts that are using Gaggle as part of a more holistic program to identify students who need interventions or require additional support services. Whether they call Gaggle their first alarm system or their safety net, it provides reassurance that they are doing everything possible to enhance their students’ safety and well-being.”

Is it just me, or does this process sound eerily similar to that used by the federal government to “red flag” people who might someday “mobilize toward violence”?

Put these pieces together and you will see that the surveillance state now has its eyes inside the classroom — and on students’ online activity — and will be able to identify these potential “mass shooters” before they can spell “gun” much less fire one.

The BuzzFeed exposé describes how Gaggle gets its product into American classrooms:

Using a combination of in-house artificial intelligence and human content moderators paid about



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\$10 an hour, Gaggle polices schools for suspicious or harmful content and images, which it says can help prevent gun violence and student suicides. It plugs into two of the biggest software suites around, Google's G Suite and Microsoft 365, and tracks everything, including notifications that may float in from Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts linked to a school email address.

Such surreptitious surveillance should give pause to every American parent who drops their children off a school subscribing to Gaggle's services.

Furthermore, as the school district is Gaggle's client, parents cannot opt out of the surveillance. Sending your child to a school that subscribes to Gaggle is tacit permission for that company to keep tabs on your child's email, web searches, and all online activity.

As part of its investigative reporting, BuzzFeed examined hundreds of documents that told a story of unpublicized and unparalleled surveillance of children, without the prior permission of their parents.

But hundreds of pages of newly revealed Gaggle documentation and content moderation policies, as well as invoices and student incident reports from 17 school districts around the country obtained via public records requests, show that Gaggle is subjecting young lives to relentless inspection, and charging the schools that use it upward of \$60,000. And it's not at all clear whether Gaggle is as effective in saving lives as it claims, or that its brand of relentless surveillance is without long-term consequences for the students it promises to protect.

Gaggle employs hundreds of people to sort through the data collected from students. These frontline monitors flag any questionable emails or Google searches. These "Level 1 Safety Representatives" look for words related to suicide, drug use, profanity, pornography, or any words considered hateful to the LGBT community.

Should a student upload any self-created image that Gaggle considered "child pornography," the child's information and his family's information is sent to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which maintains a database of child pornography."

It doesn't take a conspiracy theorist to see how this sort of designation could result in hundreds of American children being removed from their homes and placed in government-monitored and maintained foster care systems.

If one of these questionable words is found in an student's email or online activity, the student is flagged and his account is then scoured by another team of monitors. If a student is tagged once as being potentially problematical, then the administration is warned to watch the student.

Should a student's account be flagged three times, then the school's administration has the option of suspending the student's account, the prescribed punishment for violating Gaggle's "three strikes you're out" rule. This rule is described by BuzzFeed:

According to Gaggle, students who commit three strikes have their account privileges limited until a school official gives those privileges back. It's unclear if a student would lose email privileges in these situations, since it can be necessary for communicating with teachers and completing assignments.

Putting such systems in place in schools seems to have one purpose: Make students accustomed to being under constant surveillance while they are young, so that when they are adults, being watched is something so common they don't realize that their rights have been taken from them and thus they wouldn't think of protesting against any other surveillance program.



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The last word goes to Sarah Roberts, a UCLA professor, who told BuzzFeed, “My sense about this particular suite of products and services is that it’s a solution in search of a problem, which is to say that the only way that the logic of it works is if we first accept that our children ought to be captured within a digital system, basically, from the time they’re sentient until further notice.”

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