



Google Uses Education Apps to Spy on Students

A non-profit organization dedicated to exposing threats to digital liberties and preserving those liberties has accused Google of spying on students via the use of Chromebooks in schools. In violation of an agreement Google signed in January forbidding the harvesting of student data, it has done exactly that “for its own purposes,” according to a complaint the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) has filed with the FTC.



Education in the digital age involves learning to use technology. Schools have been issuing laptops and tablets to students for several years now, and the trend is growing. According to EFF, “Almost one third of all students — elementary through high school — already use school-issued digital devices.” Many of those students are issued their first device when they are as young as seven years old.

As more and more tech companies have realized the value of the educational market, competition has grown. With many schools spending a large portion of their budget on high-end devices such as Apple iPads and Macbooks, Google offered a way to lower those costs and allow cloud integration with its popular Chromebooks. The low-priced laptops run a modified version of the Linux operating system and — rather than relying on physical storage — use Google applications and a Google account to store data via the Internet.

As part of its attempt to appeal to schools, the search giant launched a suite of applications specifically geared toward education. The Google Apps for Education (GAFE) suite is advertised by Google as “free for schools with 24/7 support at no cost.” Google’s offer was compelling: low-priced devices with free cloud storage and a suite of free cloud-based education applications that allow easy collaboration between students and teachers. The combination added up to a success for Google. The company boasts that GAFE is being used by nearly 50 million students in 15 countries. As [Education Dive](#) reports:

The Google-powered Chromebooks are currently used more than any other personal computing device in American classrooms, largely due to their inexpensive price tag, which can be as low as \$149. They’re also “built to be abused,” making them perfect for K-12 classrooms. Between April and June of this year, Chromebooks accounted for 50% of all K-12 tech device sales.

Those numbers would be great if they were about young people learning to use technology tools aimed at productivity and collaboration, as Google claims. But EFF says Google has been using the Chromebooks and GAFE (which comes pre-installed on the models sold to schools) to monitor the students, and harvest and store data about them and their activities.

In a press release, EFF Staff Attorney Nate Cardozo stated, “Despite publicly promising not to, Google mines students’ browsing data and other information, and uses it for the company’s own purposes. Making such promises and failing to live up to them is a violation of FTC rules against unfair and deceptive business practices.” He added, “Minors shouldn’t be tracked or used as guinea pigs, with their data treated as a profit center. If Google wants to use students’ data to ‘improve Google products,’



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then it needs to get express consent from parents.”

The press release also says, “We are calling on the FTC to investigate Google’s conduct, stop the company from using student personal information for its own purposes, and order the company to destroy all information it has collected that’s not for educational purposes.”

For its part, Google denies EFF’s accusation. *The Guardian* [reported](#):

A Google spokesperson said: “Our services enable students everywhere to learn and keep their information private and secure. While we appreciate EFF’s focus on student privacy, we are confident that these tools comply with both the law and our promises, including the Student Privacy Pledge.”

In the [Student Privacy Agreement](#) mentioned in Google’s denial, companies — both educational and technical — promise not to harvest data on students. Of the more than 200 companies to sign the agreement, Google was one of the last. The company resisted pressure to sign at first, deciding to do so only after being named in lawsuits for its practices of data-mining student information. In May, *Tech Times* [reported](#) that Google said it “will stop scanning the Gmail accounts of students for advertising purposes beginning right this very moment. The practice was scrutinized recently in a court case, so it is easy to see why the company has chosen to go this route.” The report adds:

Google did admit that it scanned emails sent and received by students from schools who use Google Apps for education. Such activities by Google may have breached the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. However, Google insisted that its activities were in line with the law.

In January, Google signed the agreement and promised that it had changed its policies to comply with the agreement.

Now, Google’s carefully worded denial of EFF’s FTC complaint focuses on whether or not the GAFE suite (“these tools”) violated either “the law” or its “promises” by the way it treats student data. It all sounds a little too familiar. This time, though, Google has to deal not only with the law; it must also address whether it has violated the Student Privacy Agreement. If it has, the FTC may find that Google has been conducting “unfair and deceptive business practices” by promising that it had stopped collecting student data in order to convince schools and parents that its GAFE suite is not harvesting student data when it actually is.

Google is attempting to keep the focus on the GAFE tools, which it claims do not track students’ browsing or allow Google to harvest their data; however, there is more to it than that. When a student creates a Google account to use the GAFE tools, they provide personally identifiable information including name, age, and address. Because that same information is tied to the student’s regular Google account and applications outside of the GAFE suite — including Google’s search services, the Chrome browser, YouTube, Blogger, and more — all of that data is tied together into one profile. While Google claims not to be harvesting students’ data, it appears that the tech giant considers only the data that is created as part of the GAFE suite to be protected by the agreement. EFF and others concerned about privacy fail to see that artificial distinction.

As the Center for Digital Education [reports](#):

One of the complaints centers around Chrome browser history, specifically the Chrome Sync tool that allows students to log into their education account from multiple Chromebooks or Chrome browsers and see the same frequently used apps, extensions, bookmarks and websites. The tool



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itself is not the problem; it's the fact that Chrome Sync does not ask students' or parents' permission before it runs.

As schools and parents learn what Google has been doing, they may look to other services such as those offered by Microsoft and Apple, which may not be any better. EFF has said that though Google was the first company to be scrutinized by the organization, it has its eye on the others, as well.

As for Google, it may face fines and sanctions from the FTC. The company may have to do more than simply make hollow promises to get out of this mess.



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