

Reality check on technology uses in UK state schools

By Sarah Turner

Over the last few years, almost every person with caring responsibilities for children has been aware of the significant role digital technologies have played in schooling during the pandemic. Whether as a means of facilitating online learning, making sure that homework gets handed in, or helping cement learning principles, digital technologies are firmly part of the education system. And yet, at present, the legal and regulatory landscape that these technologies inhabit is complicated and confusing, making the idea of child-rights-respecting data governance still feel remote.

As with every organisation, schools in the UK have been subject to the requirements of the GDPR (now the UK GDPR) since the passing of the Data Protection Act 2018. Not much really changed with the new law regarding how schools should have approached data protection, but the threat of fines, particularly, put the need to be “compliant” front and centre. And not without a significant burden: personal data is everywhere in schools, in many formats. It’s a lot to take in – and that’s before the addition of complex, often opaque, digital technologies that might make it hard to adhere to good data protection principles (such as performing data protection impact assessments, or ensuring data minimisation) very hard.

As part of our Beneficial Use of Education Data workstream, The Digital Futures Commission is currently working with state schools in England to understand how well digital technologies that are used for education and attainment are used, with an eye on how student data feeds into around and through these products. What are the purposes of these technologies? How does the procurement process work – are vendors transparent and approachable, is information about data collection and its use readily available, and how do schools track the use of free software? How do schools make sure that there is digital equity amongst students? And how often are plans to use particular technologies curtailed by costs, integration with existing systems or other issues?



Photo by Giovanni Gagliardi on Unsplash

So far, we have spoken with headteachers and other members of senior leadership teams, governors, class teachers and heads of departments, in-school, Multi-Academy Trust and Trust Data Protection Officers, as well as independent Data Protection Officers, local authority teams and education union staff. Through talking to us over video chat, they

have painted a picture of a vibrant – but very complex – environment, where technology is usually embraced – but far underperforms from what is perhaps promised, and is a far cry from the personalised education systems that are sometimes hailed as the ultimate goal of EdTech products.

Noticeably, we are seeing schools having to make tough decisions about how to fund technology, how to deploy that technology for students, as well as to help the school run more efficiently. And that is before getting to the difficulty of protecting student (and teacher, and parent) data when using all these systems. Who takes responsibility for data protection? Is the risk of using a solution with less-than-optimal data management practices worth it to facilitate educating children? How do you determine if buying licences for software presents a better return on investment than, say, an extra teaching assistant or refurbishing a new classroom? Who takes responsibility for the school's cyber security – and what happens when something bad happens?

We are using the information we are gaining from these interviews to pull together an understanding – alongside other pieces of work undertaken for this workstream – of what is really happening on the ground, where schools need support with procuring, deploying and using this technology, and what that support might look like. We want to help schools find a way to manage the tricky issues, particularly those around the use of student data so that they can use educational technologies in a considered – but effective – way. We will be publishing conclusions and suggestions in the coming months.

If you are reading this as someone involved in using technology for educational or attainment purposes in state school(s) in England, and want your opinions captured in our analysis and subsequent recommendations, do, please get in touch by emailing sarah@5rightsfoundation.com to arrange an interview.

Originally posted on <https://digitalfuturescommission.org.uk/> on April 4, 2022 .