

SAFEGUARDING STUDENTS: MORE THAN JUST INTERNET MONITORING



Published by Academy Today

The use of technology in schools has provided students with a whole new way to connect and communicate with each other and their teachers, in addition to being a great source for learning. However, on the flipside, access to the wider internet may mean that there is a temptation for students to access websites with inappropriate content – or use it as a platform where negative behaviour can escalate, such as for cyberbullying or other undesirable activities.

Just as technology plays its part in spreading such problems in schools, it also has a significant role to play in quashing them. The use of online filtering and monitoring tools to monitor students' internet activity has been an Ofsted requirement for schools for some time now, but it alone doesn't provide the bigger picture of what's really happening.

Big Brother vs protection

In the past, some schools have simply blocked students' access to all websites that were not lesson-specific. That certainly eliminates the issue, but it doesn't allow students the opportunity to learn about the safe and responsible use of the internet - digital citizenship - in a controlled environment. Additionally, it doesn't provide the flexibility to allow specific websites to appear for particular age groups: i.e. Facebook access for GCSE Business Studies students studying marketing tools.

Overall, blocking access does nothing to safeguard the student because, in the majority of cases, nobody knew that access was being attempted. In the same way, internet monitoring on its own doesn't provide context to the search, which could mean schools are faced with a backlog of false alerts or are missing the crucial details to understanding students' behaviour.

The Department for Education's "Keeping Children Safe In Education" guidance highlights the need for schools to effectively monitor and control what students are doing online. This brings with it a whole new set of requirements, such as monitoring online interaction with

others, their personal conduct and the content being accessed. So, in addition to monitoring internet access, schools should also be able to monitor search terms, what students are talking about on chat applications and what websites/content they are viewing (whether good or bad).

Join the dots

However, no matter what tools schools use to achieve this, if there is no context provided and the information isn't joined up to deliver the full picture, schools still face the same issues as if they were simply filtering and monitoring internet access only.

By reviewing the student's whole journey – as opposed to just the end event – it may highlight trends or issues that otherwise would not have been picked up, allowing the school to gain a real insight into a student's wellbeing. For example, a student searches for 'jollop' (a slang term for laxatives) and then, a couple of hours later, searches for 'Boots.com' (a provider of dietary supplements including laxatives). Individually, these searches may not seem concerning; however, when reviewed in sequence, they may indicate a potential issue related to eating disorders.

Based on keyword monitoring alone, this search is also unlikely to be flagged. However, once the context is applied, i.e. the surrounding search sentence such as 'how to use jollop to get skinny' vs 'Best jollop to put on my burger', it may highlight a more concerning trending

topic that a school can review and decide whether it needs to launch assemblies or group discussions to address the issue head-on.

The above example also highlights how crucial it is for schools to be aware of slang terms used by students (peer and year groups) and ensure these are included in their keyword databases. Using databases built and maintained by safeguarding specialists and sharing databases with other schools also helps prevent gaps appearing that may compromise any safeguarding initiative in place.

Online vs offline

Online safeguarding is only one side of the coin; safeguarding issues also occur offline and then sometimes move online as students seek out information or advice. Having the full picture of what issues are trending and which students are vulnerable gives staff a starting point of areas or issues they should look out for.

Empower the students

Lastly, it's important to remind students of the role they play in their own online safety and general wellbeing, for example, by asking them to agree to the school's Acceptable Usage Policy before going online.

Additionally, helping them to access help independently, by supplying a tailored list of safeguarding resources or allowing students to report their concerns, is key to supporting students proactively.

