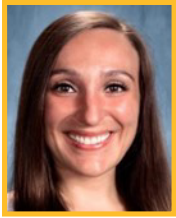


# Safety and Security and its Interaction with Technology: Implications for 21<sup>st</sup>-Century School Leaders

By Dr. Timothy Stoops and Dianntha McCaughtry



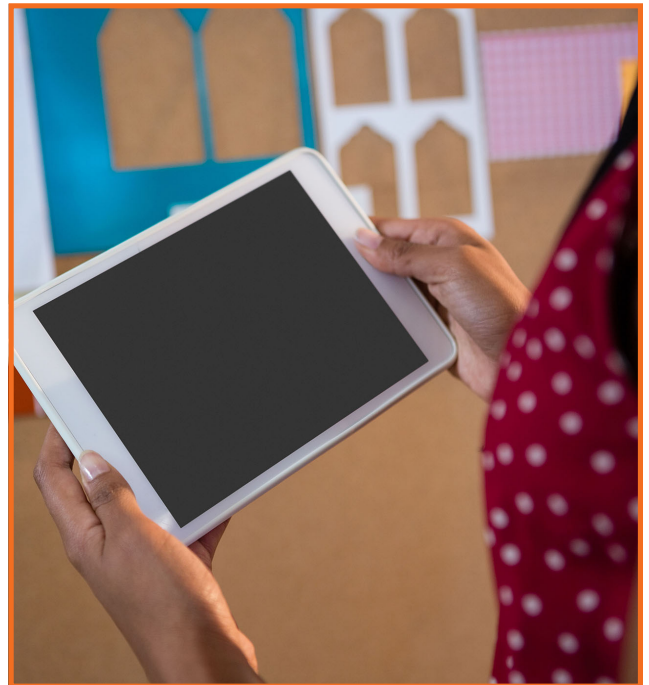
**About the Authors:** **Dr. Timothy Stoops** is the Director of Assessment and Alternative Learning in Millcreek Township School District in Erie, Pennsylvania. He also oversees safety and security in his current role. Dr. Stoops has served as an assistant principal, principal, alternative education administrator and director of secondary education. He has classroom experience in modern languages and English education.

**Dianntha McCaughtry** is an Assistant Principal in Millcreek Township School District in Erie, Pennsylvania. She has extensive classroom teacher experience as a literacy educator, social studies teacher and instructional coach. Ms. McCaughtry has served as an administrator in charter-school and public-school capacities.

School leaders today employ a wide range of strategies, practices, procedures and training to ensure the safety of every child and staff member who walks through their school doors each day. There are essential and compelling reasons to do so, most notably regarding school shootings. *Education Week* has been tracking school shooting data for the past four years, and their data indicates that there have been 119 school shootings since 2018 (“School Shootings This Year,” 2022). Increased focus and prioritization of school safety and security are due in part to the fact that acts of violence can occur in any district at any time. According to the School Superintendents Association, “Violence can happen anywhere, and schools must remain prepared to respond and to protect students and staff in our free and open society. Overwhelmingly, schools are safe and nurturing places for students, and school administrators are dedicated to making sure schools remain safe learning environments for all students” (AASA, 2022). The spotlight on safety and security in schools has gained significant attention over the past two decades, primarily in the aftermath of the Columbine High School shooting. Before this, safety and security focused mainly on anti-theft and vandalism and eventually evolved into concern for teachers to its current state of students and staff.

With the onset of school shootings and school violence, safety and security are a top priority today. Technological advances have also gained prominence in the discussion of proactively preventing violent acts in today’s schools. Surveillance camera monitoring, online student monitoring systems, door monitoring devices and school software systems are just a few examples of emerging technologies that are being embraced by school districts to ensure student and staff safety. For school administrators, sifting through such an array of options can be arduous. There are no easy answers and are often complicated by the challenges of appropriating money to support technology and safety.

A case study of one school district’s embrace of technology to assist in safety and security is presented here to purposefully examine the implementation process, emphasizing intended and unintended outcomes. The Millcreek Township School District (MTSD), located in Erie, Pennsylvania, partnered with an online student safety monitoring company. This student safety program monitors all Google-related student accounts, from Google searches to Google Docs. Student email is also monitored via this system. It should be noted that this program monitors district-issued technology and district-created accounts, not students’ personal emails, social media accounts, etc. This program simultaneously supports school safety, students’ safety and mental health by monitoring students’ online behaviors in real-time. A core member of the company’s team will contact school officials when a student’s online activities are flagged by showing signs of self-harm, depression, thoughts of suicide, substance abuse, cyberbullying, unhealthy relationships and credible threats of violence against others. One important aspect of technology for student safety is their privacy practices and policies. This company complied with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Family Educa-



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tion Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) guidelines and was one of the first companies to sign the Student Privacy Pledge.

Additionally, the company maintains clear terms regarding how they treat student and staff data. Year after year, they have pledged to reinforce their commitment to privacy by aligning with the Future of Privacy Forum (FPF) and the Software & Information Industry Association (SIIA) to advance data privacy protection regarding the collection, use and maintenance of personal information. These technologies also bring to question the legality of monitoring students' behaviors beyond the school day; because the safety program would only be monitoring district-provided technology and district-created accounts, any inappropriate or questionable content would fall under the district's acceptable use policies within their Student Code of Conduct whether the activity is occurring during or beyond the school day. While inappropriate content may result in some form of disciplinary action, technology allows school personnel to assess students' needs and provide them with appropriate resources such as counseling services.

In addition to privacy, equity must be at the forefront of investigating potential student situations. The example company that we have referenced has embedded algorithms to combat discrimination issues and maintain equity within their program. The company's team will even go so far as to adjust the algorithms based on school district personnel feedback on potential biases of student groups. However, the response to such flags relies on the school personnel's abilities to uphold that equity. Creating negative attention to over-vigilance and reaction to students based on race, gender, ethnicity or socio-economic background causes far more short- and long-term negativity with significant consequences.

An anticipated outcome of this technology adoption was being mindful of the reaction of parents and students. Overwhelmingly, the parent support of the program was evident from day one of implementation. Fortunately, even in cases rated as requiring immediate action, few required it. For example, one student had emailed a peer and stated that she failed a chapter test and wanted to kill herself. After investigation, it was determined that the student was using inflammatory language to their friend with no real intent. However, in another instance, a student opened a document in Google Docs they created at the beginning of the school

year before the technology implementation. The student who created the Google Doc had no prior troubled history and had only been to the office a handful of times for minor infractions. However, the Google Doc contained several concerning words and phrases, which were immediately flagged, and the document was sent to administration for review. The content of the Google Doc brought to light a number of mental health and other concerns relative to abuse, self-harm, suicidal ideations and more, prompting immediate contact with the student's parents. Now, the student and their family are receiving counseling services, and the student is making significant improvements. The vast majority of parents were grateful for the school official notifying them and for the technology. Students were ambivalent about this implementation. In some instances, students appreciated the concern for their well-being. Other times, they believed that the district was being too overbearing and intrusive.

It is important to note that the student monitoring system observes student online behavior 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And again, it monitors only student district

accounts, not accounts that students hold privately on forums such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, etc. In understanding the monitoring complexity of the school day and beyond, districts must have a firm protocol regarding how flagged student activity will be addressed. This also addresses one of the unintended consequences. There must be a clear internal protocol regarding what school personnel will be involved beyond the school day. Because notifications could come at any hour of the day or evening, a protocol that emphasizes collaboration is far more effective than one in isolation in addressing potentially serious student situations.

Implementing technology in schools takes careful thought and consideration. Schools must first develop specificity and purpose to what they hope technology can

accomplish to understand how technology can impact safety and security. For example, schools must outwardly embrace and be transparent to the philosophy and practice that emotional and physical safety in school is directly related to academic performance and emotional well-being. The school's vision and approach must support these vital beliefs. Clearly stated, it is well-documented that students who feel safe perform better and are less prone or susceptible to their emotional and social health being compromised. Technology alone cannot replace or subvert the importance of teachers and staff interacting with students each day. When considering school-wide efforts to promote

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safety, the National Association of School Psychologists recommends addressing the continuum of needs and services that lead to improved safety, well-being and learning for children and youth (NASP, 2013). However, monitoring students' experiences, beliefs and challenges is daunting. With the advent of new technologies, these endeavors can be more manageable for school leaders. Schools that use planned, systematic techniques for gathering information on threats, for example, may be well-positioned to receive tips on planned attacks and respond appropriately. With the arrival of numerous technologies associated with safety and technology, schools can better equip themselves to counter school violence and create physically safe and secure

spaces for the building and emotionally safe and secure spaces for staff and students.

Embracing technology and incorporating it into school safety and security is emerging in its presence and capacity to help keep schools safe. Incorporating such measures requires careful calculation for optimum benefit. There is no greater challenge or responsibility in keeping students and staff safe. Selecting the appropriate resource involves time investment and careful planning. Schools need to embrace such mindfulness in their efforts to ensure an optimum safe learning environment.

For further information, please contact Dr. Stoops at [stoops@mtsd.org](mailto:stoops@mtsd.org)

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