

iPad apps scrutinized after chat room mishap

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After an incident that left administrators “horrified,” East Irondequoit Central School District officials are rethinking the way they manage Apple iPads given to their students.

“It was an eye-opener for us. We’re definitely going to make some changes,” said Joseph Sutorius, the district’s director of technology services.

A fifth-grade girl received an “inappropriate” message from a stranger while using a social networking app that she was allowed to download under district rules.

The episode revealed shortcomings in the safeguards in place in East Irondequoit and possibly at numerous other schools that give students laptop computers and tablets, such as iPads.

Thousands of students across the county are using school-provided computer devices such as laptops, Chromebooks, iPads and other tablets. The growth in the number of devices provided to students is expected to test the methods used to manage the devices and guard against incidents like what happened in East Irondequoit, and possibly worse.

“It’s definitely something that is being sorted out as people begin to use these devices for classroom distribution,” said Jody Siegle, executive director of the Monroe County School Boards

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Tango’s terms of service say it is for 13 and older, but Apple’s store rates it for ages 4-plus.

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Association.

"All of us, adults and children, need to learn how to use these devices properly and how to protect ourselves when using them," she said. "Learning is a process of doing something, encountering some failures, figuring out how to do it right, and doing it again."

Friend of a friend?

On Jan. 25, the fifthgrade girl's parents told district officials and Irondequoit police about the message sent to her via the social networking app Tango.

School officials and police wouldn't reveal the exact content of the message, but Irondequoit police Sgt. Mark Bean, who expects the investigation to last several months, said the culprit could face charges of endangering the welfare of a child or disseminating indecent material.

The girl was not physically harmed, and no images were sent to her.

"I thought we had done a good job of protecting students," Sutorius said. "We put a mechanism in place that took us months to get working with the vendors involved."

"Frankly, we're horrified that it even happened. We take student safety and security very seriously, and we've got mechanisms in place to make sure that vetted apps are what land on student iPads," he said.

The girl was part of a group chat with friends when the culprit apparently asked to join and was allowed in.

"Somehow he hooked up into that chat room and then befriended them. I can only assume that somehow he got into the chat room by being a friend of a friend of a friend," Bean said.

About half the students in the East Irondequoit school district now have iPads. The rest will get them next year, said district spokesman David Yates.

Before a student can take their iPad home, a parent must sign an agreement promising to pay for repair or replacement costs if it's lost, stolen or damaged.

All Internet activity on the devices passes through a filter to avoid inappropriate content.

"They could be at a Starbucks in Ithaca and it's still going to drive them through our web filter," Sutorius said.

Students in East Irondequoit, and many other districts that provide iPads, are allowed to download apps for personal use as long as they are considered age-appropriate, based on ratings in Apple's App Store, which are sometimes different from the app's terms of use. According to Tango's terms of use, the app is "solely for users who are 13 years of age or older." But the App Store age rating is 4+. Most fifth-graders are 10 to 12 years old.

The App Store rating is based on information from developers about how frequently the app content includes violence, nudity, sexual content, mature themes, gambling or drug use. But the app's terms of use are based on federal law that puts an age restriction of 13 on apps and websites that collect personal information, such as phone numbers and email addresses. An email address or phone number is needed to use Tango. So why do schools use the App Store age ratings, instead of the terms of use recommendation? "We talked about that all week," Sutorius said.

He said the district reported the problem to Apple officials, and he met with three company representatives on Jan. 29.

"They are probably going to scold the developer and tweak that rating," Sutorius said. Apple officials did not respond to a request for comment. And East Irondequoit officials will adjust their policies "because now we know we can't trust Apple's rating," Sutorius said.

Time on task

Most schools see the computer devices as a way to extend the educational opportunities beyond the campus and throughout the day. It can be used as an instructional tool by teachers and to manage assignments and communicate with students. Students can

use them for research, and they get kids excited about learning, advocates say. Jim Fenwick, a professor at the Nazareth College School of Education and an expert in educational technology, is a proponent of the district-provided devices, as long as they are carefully managed and students are not allowed to download apps on their own. "Clearly the students who have such things at their fingertips are much more motivated and spend more time on task," he said.

There isn't enough data to show that those students learn more, "but the fact that they're more motivated and paying more attention to it, and more excited about it, would lead one to believe that, because of those factors they will end up actually doing better on their courses," he said.

But Fenwick has doubts about the benefits of having students take the devices home. Students in most suburban districts usually already have computers and Wi-Fi access at home, while students in poorer urban districts are less likely to have computers or Wi-Fi at home.

"They have to be able to have Wi-Fi, and the school's not going to be able to pay for a subscription to Wi-Fi for all their students. Unless there's Wi-Fi at home, those iPads, or whatever they're using, are worthless at home," Fenwick said.

Districts that let students take them home usually offer an insurance policy for about \$25, but Fenwick said he thinks the district should accept all the risk.

"The problem is that, if teachers start requiring students to do things on iPads at home, you can't then make the parent pay for the insurance because it's part of the school work. If the parent says, 'I can't afford that. I don't want to pay for that,' then their child is at a real disadvantage because they don't have an iPad at home and can't do the work that's assigned," Fenwick said. The Rochester School District has about 5,000 Chromebooks, said Annmarie Lehner, district information technology officer. About 3,000 of those are shared by students in schools and are not taken off campus. About 2,000 are assigned to specific students in seven of the district's schools, but they are not taken home. The only devices that go home with city students are Chromebooks assigned to about 50 to 75 students who attend high school classes in the morning and take a bus to Monroe Community College in the afternoon, keeping their Chromebooks with them.

The district plans to expand the number of devices with the expected state funding from the \$2 billion Smart Schools Technology Bond Act, which was approved by voters last November. The city schools are tentatively set to receive \$47 million in technology funding. That funding is expected to help more districts buy devices for students and beef up related programs, hardware and technology services.

Many districts providing devices to students buy them through their local Board of Cooperative Educational Services. All nine districts in the BOCES 2 territory on the west side of Monroe County and part of Orleans County have purchased iPads for students, said BOCES 2 director of information Stephen Dawe.

John Walker, spokesman for BOCES 1, said the 10 east-side districts have about 5,500 devices, including 4,100 iPads, 600 Chromebooks and 800 LearnPad tablets.

In the Hilton Central School District, which provides iPads to students, "a few select parents" questioned iPad policies, and they discussed it with district officials, said Michael Zaffuts, Hilton's district director of technology. "But every parent in the end ended up signing the agreement," Zaffuts said. In Hilton, students in fifth, sixth, seventh and ninth grades now have district-issued iPads. The program will soon be expanded so that all students in fifth through 12th grade will have their own iPad that they can take home. Hilton's system works like East Irondequoit's. All iPad Internet usage is filtered by the district, and students can download age-appropriate apps, based on the Apple store's ratings. "We do understand that by providing a personal electronic device to students that there's an inherent risk that goes along with that," Zaffuts said. But a recent survey in the Hilton district showed that 96 percent of the students had Internet access at home, so the addition of a school-provided device is not likely to increase their exposure to any online dangers, he said.

"The larger point is that we see the tremendous educational value in the tools and we understand that there's a risk that goes along with that. We try to teach our kids discretion," he said. "We try to provide opportunities for the families to educate themselves. We apply what filters we can with the understanding that there is an opportunity for inappropriate use of the device."

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Fifth-grade teacher Michael Sereno works with his students on a reading project using school provided iPads at the Laurelton Pardee Intermediate School in East Irondequoit on Feb. 4.

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