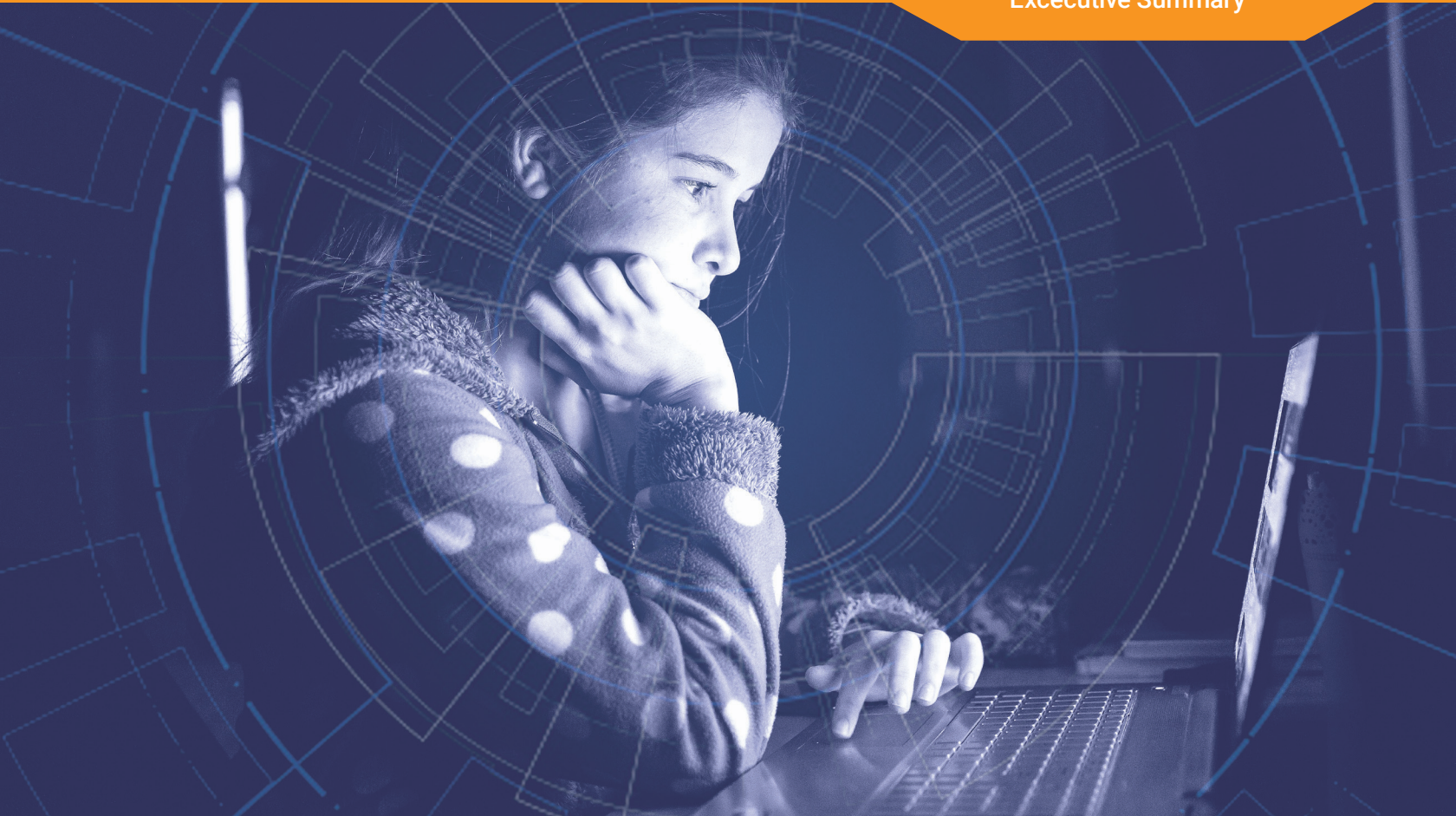# Guardian Angel Or Big Brother?

What Educators Really Think Of Student Safety Platforms

gaggle

K-12 educators are increasingly embracing platforms that use artificial intelligence and human monitoring to track student activity on school-issued software and devices with the goal of keeping students safe from suicide, violence, bullying, sexual predation, and other dangers. As relatively new technologies, these platforms are not always well-understood, with some characterizing them as big-brother-like surveillance and others viewing them more like guardian angels that help keep students and schools safe from harm. This whitepaper addresses five common questions about these platforms by drawing upon a survey of those who arguably know them best—

the mental health professionals, principals, and district leaders who are charged with keeping students safe:

1. Do users believe that student safety platforms help keep students safe?

Survey results suggest the answer to this question is a resounding "yes." Ninety-five percent of Gaggle users and 97 percent of those who use other apps say their student safety platforms help keep their students safe from threats. Ninety-six percent of Gaggle users and 94 percent of those who use other apps say their platforms help keep students safe from suicide and/or self harm. And 92 percent of Gaggle users and 88 percent of those who use other apps say their platforms protect students

from sexual predators. Users report that, over the past two years, their student safety platforms have helped prevent a median of one suicide for every 200 students enrolled in their districts' schools.

2. How often do school officials say that student safety platforms fail to alert educators about risky student behavior (false negatives) or mistakenly flag items as problematic when they are not (false positives)?

Safety platform users say their systems virtually never fail to make them aware of dangerous situations and that a minority of alerts (15 percent for Gaggle users, 20 percent for users of other systems) are false positives.

3. How do school officials think student safety platforms impact LGBTQ students?

More than 70 percent of users say their platforms help limit anti-LGBTQ harassment by bringing the behavior to educators' attention while a minority of users (11 percent of Gaggle clients and 14 percent of respondents who use other platforms) report that their systems endanger LGBTQ students by outing them.

4. Do school officials believe that student safety platforms contribute to the "school-to-prison pipeline?"

Just under 1 in 5 users say their platforms contribute to the "school-to-prison pipeline," a phenomenon that occurs when students (typically disproportionately Black) face legal consequences for behavior that occurs at school. One reason may be that platforms are more frequently used to identify risks than to punish students—more than 70 percent of users say their safety alerts lead to disciplinary consequences for students at most a few times per semester.

5. Do users believe the privacy concerns outweigh the benefits of student safety platforms?

More than three-quarters of users say that student privacy is not an issue because their student safety platforms save student lives. Although users place a high

> **More than 3/4 of users say that student privacy is not an issue because their student safety platforms save student lives.**

priority on student privacy (rating it an 8 out of 10 where 0=of no importance at all and 10=a top priority), they assign student safety and mental health higher priority ratings (10 out of 10). Among the 22 percent of survey respondents who do not use safety platforms, the top reasons are limited awareness that these systems exist and affordability, not concerns about student privacy.

The survey described in this whitepaper was conducted by the nonprofit, nonpartisan EdWeek Research Center and commissioned by student safety platform Gaggle. The 932 educators who responded include 209 Gaggle customers, and 723 K-12 mental health professionals and administrators drawn from a nationally representative sample. The survey was fielded online May 17th to June 7th, 2022. It's important to note that, while the results provide valuable information on the experiences and perceptions of K-12 educators who use safety platforms, they cannot speak to the experiences of the students whose activities are monitored because a student survey was beyond the scope of this project. However, survey results clearly suggest that educators who use student safety platforms are much more likely to view them as guardian angels than as big brother-like surveillance tools.

gaggle

EdWeek
Research Center

With more and more instructional activities and resources moving online, K-12 schools are increasingly embracing safety platforms. These programs offer real-time monitoring of student activity on school-provided devices and digital accounts, alerting educators when students appear to be placing themselves or others in danger. As student mental health and behavioral challenges have multiplied in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, these platforms have been credited with preventing suicides, exposing plans to bring weapons to school, and helping to address bullying, harassment, sexual predation, and self-harm.

Like many new technologies, student safety platforms are not always well-understood and are sometimes characterized as tools of surveillance rather than guardian angels for student and school safety.

This whitepaper addresses five of the most common concerns about this technology by sharing the results of a survey of those who are arguably most familiar with their day-to-day operations: principals, school-based mental health professionals, district leaders, and other K-12 educators whose job responsibilities include monitoring, supervising, and/or overseeing students' online safety.

Student safety platform Gaggle commissioned the survey, which was conducted by the nonprofit, nonpartisan EdWeek Research Center. At Gaggle's request, the Research Center surveyed 209 of the company's current customers. In order to validate these results against a broader sample, the Center also surveyed a nationally representative sample of 732 school and district leaders. Respondents were eliminated from the survey after the first question unless they indicated their job responsibilities included monitoring or overseeing student online safety. Of the 932 Gaggle and non-Gaggle customers who responded, 78 percent indicated their districts or schools were currently using student safety platforms. Prior to being exited from the survey, educators who said they did not use safety platforms were asked why, and questioned about whether or not they thought they would benefit from such a platform and whether they planned to adopt one in the next two years. All survey respondents encountered the following definition of student safety platforms: Student safety platforms offer real-time monitoring of student activity on school-provided digital accounts, alerting school officials when students show signs of self-harm, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, cyberbullying, illegal activities, violations of school or district policies or violence.

The objective of the survey was to examine users' experiences and insights vis-`a-vis five frequent areas of confusion and concern about student safety platforms: the prevalence of false negatives and positives; the impact of safety platforms on LGBTQ students, the degree to which safety platforms maintain school-to-prison pipelines that disproportionately effect students of color, the effectiveness of these platforms at keeping students safe, and intersection between safety platforms and student privacy. The sections below draw upon survey data to explain how educators who use safety platforms view these five key issues.

ABOUT THE SURVEY	
WHO	932 educators who indicated that their job responsibilities included monitoring, supervising the monitoring of, or overseeing student safety and/or student online activity, including 723 drawn from a list of all/almost all school and district leaders in the nation and 209 Gaggle customers.
WHAT	A 34-question survey
WHEN	May 17th-June 7th, 2022
WHEN	The survey was conducted online.

Frequently Asked Questions About Student Safety Platforms
Educators' Experiences & Views

QUESTION 1: Do users believe that student safety platforms help keep students safe?

Survey results suggest, for the majority of users, the answer is "yes." Here's how users view the ability of safety platforms to help protect students from violence, suicide or self-harm, sexual predators, and child abuse/neglect: *(Figure 1)*

- **Safety and Violence:** Nearly 100 percent of student safety platform users say their programs make schools safer by helping educators identify potential threats before anyone is harmed. Eighty-three percent of Gaggle users and 67 percent of those who use other platforms say that, in the past two years, their student safety platforms have provided information that helped their districts or schools prevent school violence such as fighting and/or bringing weapons to campus. Just 7 percent of Gaggle users and 15 percent of users of other safety platforms say they have faced school safety threats in the past two years that their apps did not help identify. *(Figure 2)*

Figure 1

Our student safety platform makes schools safer by helping educators identify potential threats before anyone is harmed

	95%	97%	96%
	Uses Gaggle	Uses a student safety platform other than Gaggle	Total
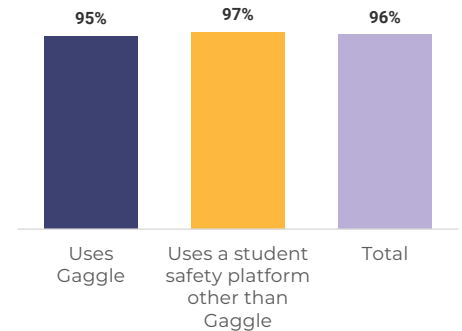
Figure 2

In the past two years, what threats to school safety, if any, have you been able to address as a result of information provided by your student safety platform? Select all that apply.

	Use Gaggle	Uses a student safety platform other than Gaggle	Total
Physical altercations/fights among students	73%	43%	58%
N/A—we have not had any threats to school safety in the past two years	20%	32%	26%
Weapons other than guns at school	28%	20%	24%
We have had threats to school safety in the past two years, but our student safety platform did not help address them	7%	15%	11%
Guns at school	12%	7%	10%
Other	3%	5%	4%
School shooting(s)	6%	2%	4%

- **Safety and Suicide/Self-Harm:** Ninety-six percent of Gaggle users (and 94 percent of users of other platforms) say that, by identifying behavior associated with mental health challenges, student safety platforms help support student mental health and wellness and prevent suicides. Ninety percent of Gaggle users (and 79 percent of users of other platforms) say their apps have helped prevent at least one suicide in the past two years. Users report that, over the past two years, their student safety platforms have helped prevent a median of one suicide for every 200 students enrolled in their districts' schools. That means that the average school district—which enrolls about 3,700 students—19 suicides would be prevented. In addition, 95 percent of Gaggle users (and 87 percent of those who use other platforms) say that, in the past two years, their student safety platforms have provided information that allowed for assistance to be provided to students who no one knew were depressed or self-harming. *(Figure 3)*

- **Safety and Sexual Predators:** Ninety-two percent of Gaggle users (and 88 percent of those who use other systems) say their student safety platforms help keep students safe from sexual predators by flagging content related to child abuse and/or child pornography. *(Figure 4)*

Figure 3

Student safety platforms and mental health challenges

By identifying behavior associated with mental health challenges, our student safety platform helps us support student mental health and wellness and prevent suicides
- 96%
- 94%
- 95%

In the past two years, our student safety platform has provided information that allowed for assistance to be provided to students who no one knew were depressed or self-harming
- 95%
- 87%
- 91%

Our student safety platform helped prevent at least one student suicide in the past two years
- 90%
- 79%
- 85%

■ Uses Gaggle
■ Uses a student safety platform other than Gaggle
■ Total

Figure 4

Safety platforms and sexual predators

In the past two years, our student safety platform has provided information that helped address sexual assault or abuse of a student or students
- 73%
- 48%
- 61%

Our student safety platform helps keep our students safe from sexual predators by flagging content related to child abuse and/or child pornography
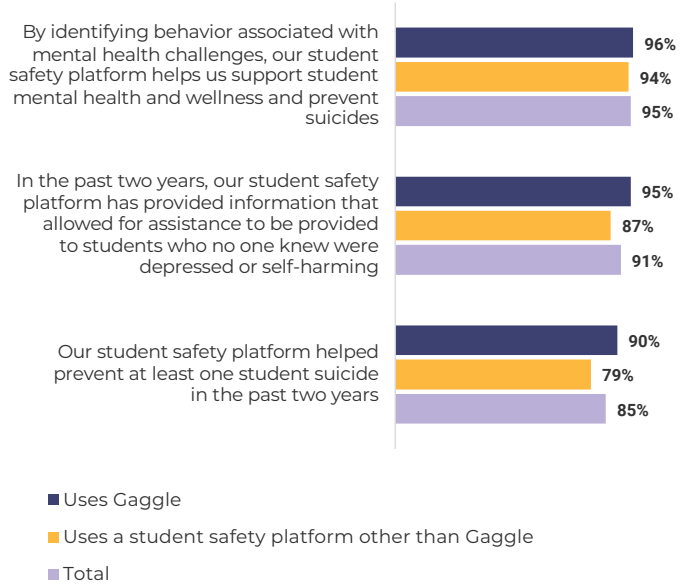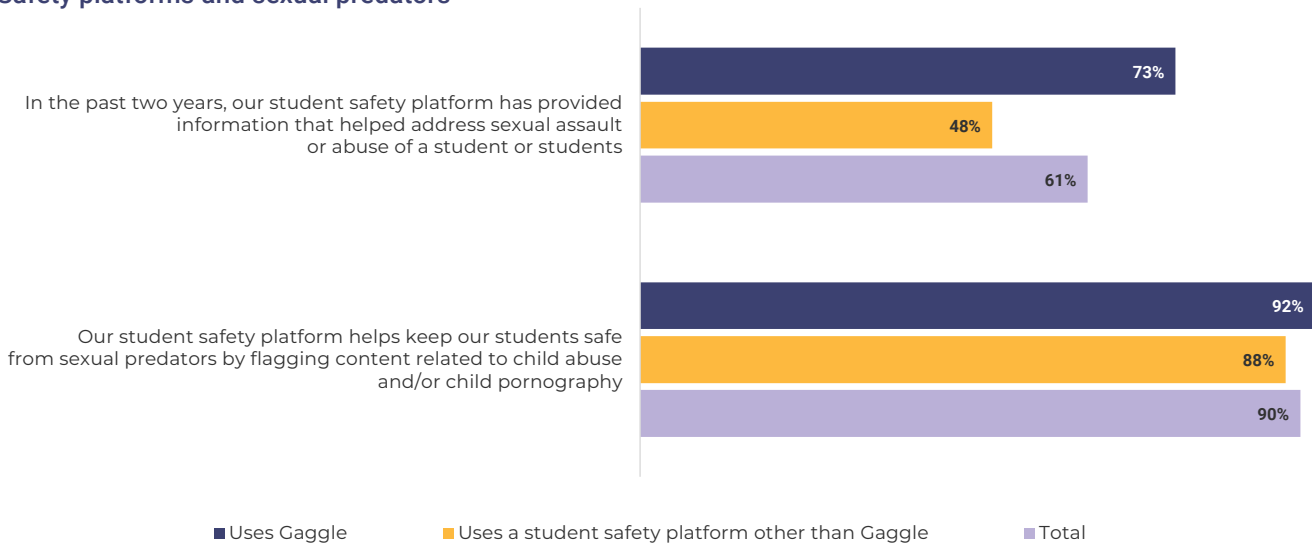- 92%
- 88%
- 90%

■ Uses Gaggle   ■ Uses a student safety platform other than Gaggle   ■ Total

Nearly three-quarters of Gaggle users and 63 percent of users of other platforms also indicated that, in the past two years, their student safety platforms have helped detect child pornography. *(Figure 5)*

• **Student safety platforms and child abuse/ neglect:** During the early months of the pandemic, child abuse rates rose as parents struggled to cope with children suddenly stuck at home because schools were closed to stem the spread of COVID. Yet child abuse was often reported less because children had less contact with teachers, doctors, and others who might have noticed what was going on. For most users (72 percent), Gaggle has helped bridge the gap over the past two years by providing information that helped address child abuse or neglect (forty-nine percent of users of other platforms said the same.) Users in larger districts were more likely than those in smaller districts to report that safety platforms have helped prevent child abuse/neglect in the past two years. *(Figure 6)*

Figure 5

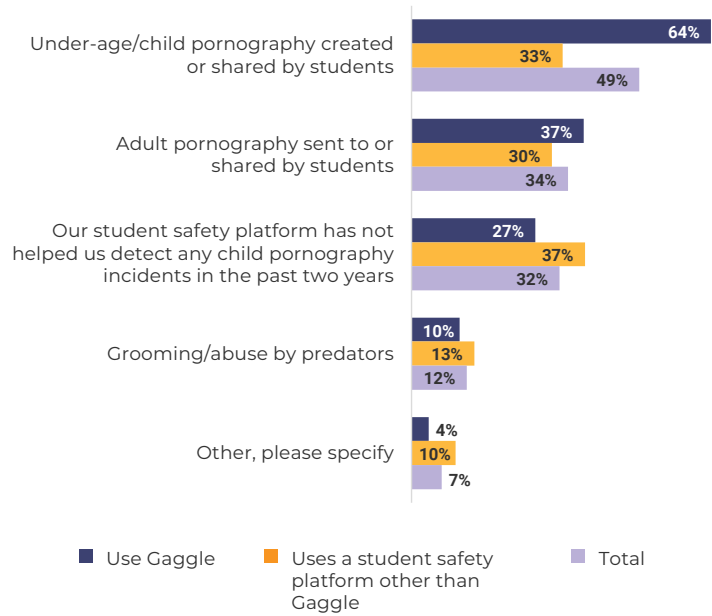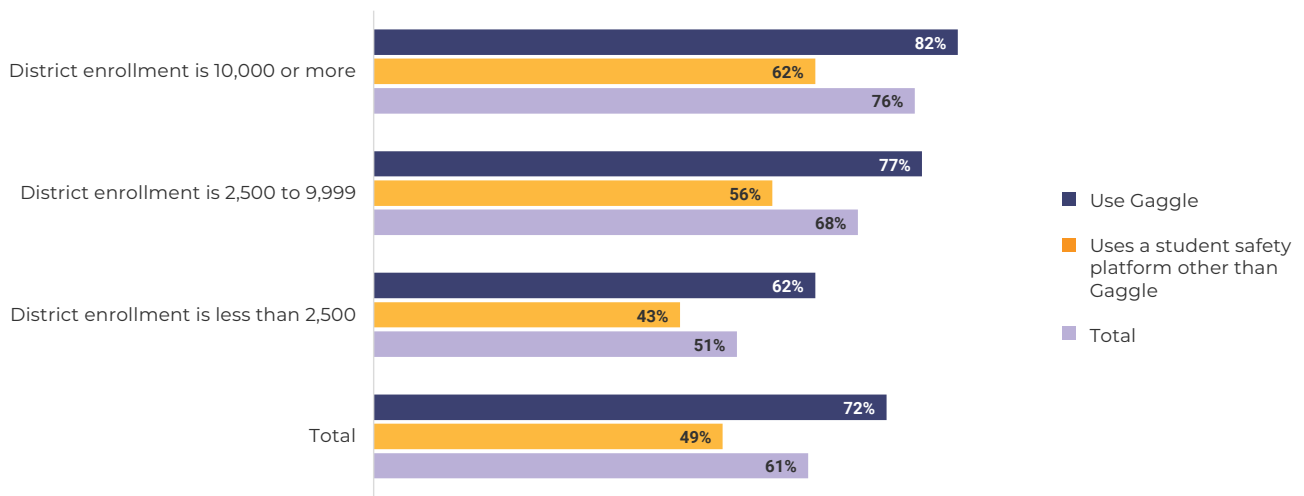### Student safety platforms and pornography depicting or sent to children

Figure 6

In the past two years, our student safety platform has provided information that helped address child abuse or neglect

QUESTION 2: How often do school officials say that student safety platforms fail to alert educators about risky student behavior (false negatives) or mistakenly flag items as problematic when they are not (false positives)?

Student safety platforms typically use a combination of artificial intelligence and content moderators hired by the platform's vendors to identify concerning items such as signals of self-harm or threats against a school. These moderators then pass along these items of concern to designated school officials for review. Neither technology nor the human moderators are infallible, so there is always a possibility that serious problems will fall through the cracks, or, conversely, that chasing down false positives will over-burden school staff or lead to unfounded accusations.

For this reason, the survey asked users what percentage of their safety platform alerts are false positives or false negatives.

Users say that a median of 0 alerts are false negatives—i.e., no problems fell through the cracks.

However, Gaggle customers say a median of 15 percent of their alerts are false positives while users of other safety platforms report a rate of 20 percent.

The results suggest that educators perceive that student safety platforms virtually never miss real warning signs and that, while false positives do occur, they represent a minority of alerts. *(Figure 7)*

Figure 7

Median percentage of student safety platform alerts that users say are false negatives or false positives

- Gaggle users
- Users of other student safety platforms
- Total

Median percentage of false positives from student safety platforms: 15%, 20%, 20%

Median percentage of false negatives from student safety platforms: 0%, 0%, 0%
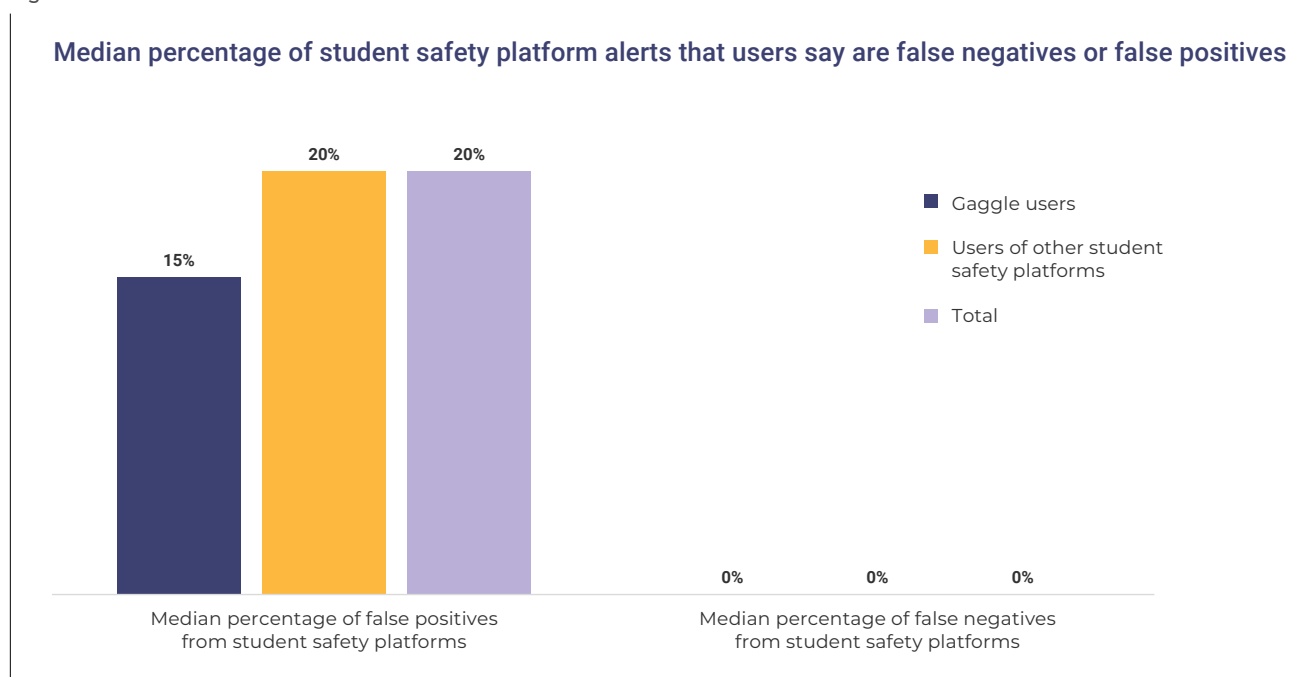
QUESTION 3: How do school officials think student safety platforms impact LGBTQ students?

LGBTQ students are a uniquely vulnerable population in that they may face negative consequences such as bullying due to their sexual orientations. As student safety platforms and their moderators scan activity on school devices and accounts, they may come across information that "outs" students as LGBTQ. In the wrong hands, such information has the potential to lead to harassment and discrimination and even homelessness or loss of educational opportunities if parents, educators, or classmates reject or harm students on the basis of student safety platform alerts.

For these reasons, the survey asked respondents a series of questions about their perceptions of their student safety platforms' impact on LGBTQ youth.

The results suggest that users believe that student safety platforms are more likely to have a positive than a negative effect on LGBTQ students: Eighty-five percent of Gaggle users (and 72 percent of users of other platforms) agree that their student safety platforms help limit or stop harassment of LGBTQ students by bringing information about the harassment to educators' attention. Fifty-four percent of Gaggle users and 31 percent of users of other platforms say that, in the past two years, their platforms have provided information that has helped address bullying or harassment on the basis of LGBTQ status. By contrast, 11 percent of Gaggle users (and 14 percent of users of other platforms) say their student safety systems endanger LGBTQ students by "outing" them. *(Figures 8 & 9)*

Figure 8

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Statement	Completely disagree	Partly disagree	Partly agree	Completely agree
[A student safety platform other than Gaggle] endangers LGBTQ students by outing them	62%	24%	12%	2%
Gaggle endangers LGBTQ students by outing them	62%	27%	9%	2%
Total	62%	26%	10%	2%
[A student safety platform other than Gaggle] helps limit or stop harassment of LGBTQ students by bringing information about the harassment to educators' attention	10%	18%	58%	14%
Gaggle helps limit or stop harassment of LGBTQ students by bringing information about the harassment to educators' attention	6%	9%	59%	26%
Total	8%	13%	59%	20%

■ Completely disagree　■ Partly disagree　■ Partly agree　■ Completely agree

Figure 9

Why do you think your district or school does not use a student safety platform? Select all that apply.

I was unaware that student safety platforms existed until I took this survey	31%
We can't afford to buy a platform	26%
We don't have the resources and staff to handle the alerts	24%
We think there are other, better ways to keep students safe	17%
We'd rather handle our own threats to student safety without involving an external vendor	16%
We lack the technological infrastructure to use this type of technology	12%
Other, please specify	11%
Parents are concerned about violations of student privacy	11%
We are concerned about violations of student privacy	10%
Students are concerned about violations of their privacy	9%
We are in the process of purchasing one	9%
We are concerned we would—or already have—faced legal consequences due to privacy violations created by student safety platforms	8%
Student safety platforms produce too many false positives that waste time/unfairly label students	7%
We are concerned that employees of student safety platforms lack the training and/or resources they need to be effective	6%
Student safety platforms miss too many threats to student safety	4%
Our students do not experience any real threats to their safety	4%
We are concerned a student safety platform would endanger LGBTQ individuals by "outing" them	4%
Student safety platforms are not effective at keeping students safe	2%
We are concerned a student safety platform would contribute to the school to prison pipeline	2%

QUESTION 4: Do school officials believe that student safety platforms contribute to the "school-to-prison pipeline?"

"School-to-prison pipelines" form when K-12 students' behavior in school leads directly or indirectly to involvement in the legal system due to the involvement of school resource officers and other law enforcement officials in schools. Students of color—especially Black students—are particularly vulnerable to ending up in the pipeline because they are disproportionately likely to face consequences of school discipline as well as harsh or exclusionary punishments that lead to law enforcement involvement. In addition, Black students are more likely than students of other ethnicities or races to attend schools where police officers are stationed.

Because student safety platforms identify not only behavior that places students at risk but risky or prohibited behavior on the part of students, they have the potential to contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline if the information they generate is shared with law enforcement, if the platforms consciously or unconsciously flag the behavior of Black students more frequently than the behavior of white students, and/or if educators punish Black students more harshly or frequently than white students on the basis of the platforms' alerts.

Just under 1 in 5 users say their student safety platforms do contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. *(Figure 10)*

One reason why only a minority of users report that their apps contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline may be that the information collected via student safety platforms does not often lead to disciplinary actions against students: Seventy percent of Gaggle users and 83 percent of users of other platforms say their safety alerts lead to disciplinary consequences for students at most a few times per semester. These survey results suggest that educators believe that their platforms are more often used to keep students safe than to identify and punish their misbehavior. *(Figure 11)*

Users are more likely to say student safety platforms help stop race-based discrimination than to report that they make it worse by feeding the school-to-prison pipeline. Seventy-two percent of Gaggle users and 60 percent of users of other platforms say their apps sometimes, often, or always help prevent harassment and bullying related to ethnicity/race. Sixty percent of Gaggle users and 47 percent of users of other platforms say that, in the past two years, their apps have provided information that helped address the bullying or harassment of students on the basis of ethnicity/race. *(Figure 12)*

Figure 10

Our student safety platform contributes to the school to prison pipeline because students of color are more likely than white students to face disciplinary or legal consequences when these platforms flag their activity
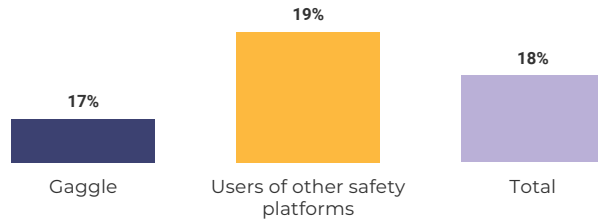

Figure 11

In the past two years, how often have alerts from your student safety platform resulted in disciplinary consequences for students?
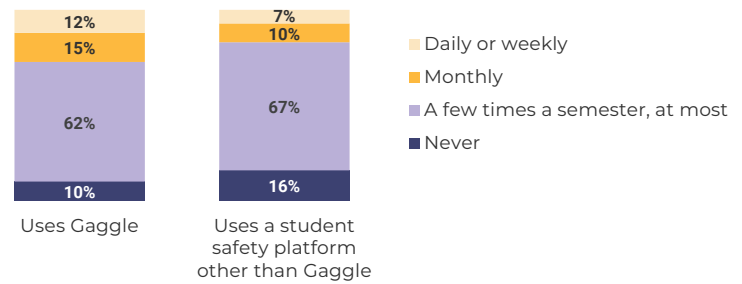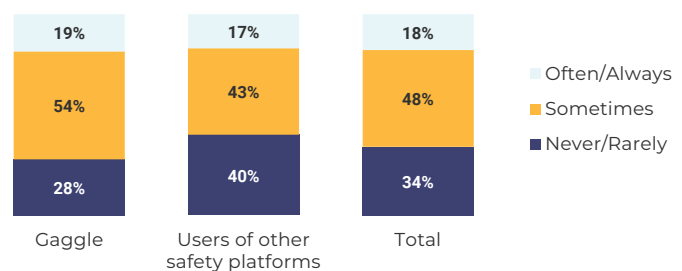

Figure 12

How often does your student safety platform help prevent harassment and bullying related to ethnicity/race?
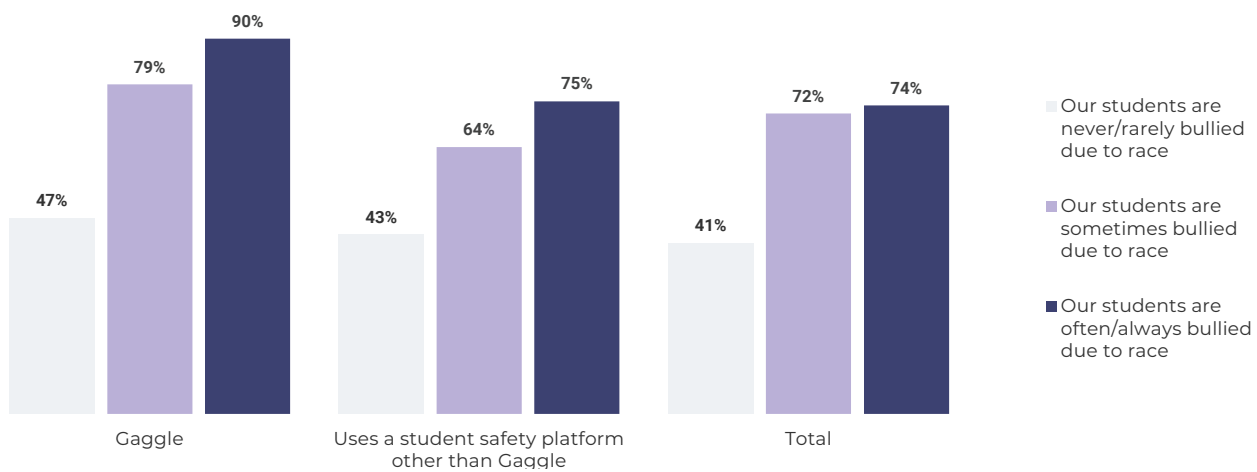

Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Compared to their peers in districts where racial bullying/ harassment is perceived as a minor issue, respondents in districts where race-based bullying is seen as more common are more likely to say their student safety platforms help prevent racial/ethnic harassment: Ninety percent of Gaggle users who say their students are often/always bullied on the basis of race report that student safety platforms help them prevent such harassment at least some of the time. By contrast, 47 percent of users who believe their students are rarely or never bullied on the basis of race say Gaggle helps stop race-related bullying at least some of the time. The same trend exists for users of other student safety platforms (75 percent versus 43 percent, respectively). *(Figure 13)*

Figure 13

Percentage of respondents who say their student safety platforms help prevent harassment and bullying related to race at least some of the time

Legend:
- Our students are never/rarely bullied due to race
- Our students are sometimes bullied due to race
- Our students are often/always bullied due to race

Gaggle: 47%, 79%, 90%
Uses a student safety platform other than Gaggle: 43%, 64%, 75%
Total: 41%, 72%, 74%

EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES & VIEWS

QUESTION 5: Do users believe the privacy concerns outweigh the benefits of student safety platforms?

Safety platforms work by tracking student activity on district-issued hardware and software inside and outside of school hours and both on and off campus. As a result, they have been criticized for violating student privacy.

However, most educators who use these platforms do not view them that way. More than three-quarters say that student privacy is not an issue because their student safety platforms save student lives. By contrast, 21 percent of Gaggle users and 25 percent who use other platforms say the privacy issues outweigh the benefits of these platforms *(Figure 14)*

That's not to say that safety platform users do not profess to value privacy.

Asked to rate the importance of their students' privacy on a scale of 0 to 10 where 0=of no importance at all and 10=a top priority, users assigned a median score of 8. However, it is worth noting that safety platform users indicated that student mental health and safety is more important to them than privacy: Both earned median "importance" scores of 10 out of 10. *(Figure 15)*

Figure 14

Which of the following best describes your views of your student safety platform?

- The privacy issues outweigh the benefits of these platforms
- Student privacy is not an issue because our student safety platform saves student lives

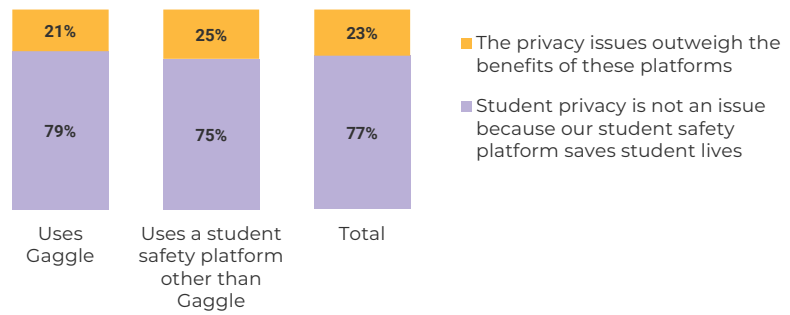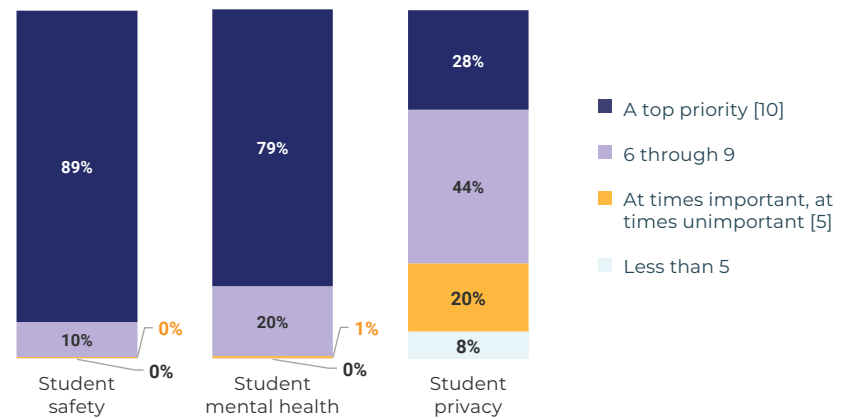|	Uses Gaggle	Uses a student safety platform other than Gaggle	Total
Privacy issues outweigh	21%	25%	23%
Privacy not an issue	79%	75%	77%

Figure 15

On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0=Of no importance at all and 10= A top priority, how important are the following considerations when it comes to your students?

- A top priority [10]
- 6 through 9
- At times important, at times unimportant [5]
- Less than 5

	Student safety	Student mental health	Student privacy
A top priority [10]	89%	79%	28%
6 through 9	10%	20%	44%
At times important	0%	1%	20%
Less than 5	0%	0%	8%

Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

For survey respondents who do not use student safety platforms, privacy concerns do not appear to be driving the decision. The top reasons survey respondents give for not using safety platforms are lack of awareness of these platforms (31 percent) and affordability (26 percent). Just 10 percent say privacy concerns are preventing them from purchasing these services. Eighty percent say their districts or schools would benefit from a student safety platform. And 43 percent say it is very or somewhat likely that they will purchase such a platform in the next two years. *(Figure 16)*

Figure 16

Why do you think your district or school does not use a student safety platform? Select all that apply.

I was unaware that student safety platforms existed until I took this survey	31%
We can't afford to buy a platform	26%
We don't have the resources and staff to handle the alerts	24%
We think there are other, better ways to keep students safe	17%
We'd rather handle our own threats to student safety without involving an external vendor	16%
We lack the technological infrastructure to use this type of technology	12%
Other, please specify	11%
Parents are concerned about violations of student privacy	11%
We are concerned about violations of student privacy	10%
Students are concerned about violations of their privacy	9%
We are in the process of purchasing one	9%
We are concerned we would—or already have—faced legal consequences due to privacy violations created by student safety platforms	8%
Student safety platforms produce too many false positives that waste time/unfairly label students	7%
We are concerned that employees of student safety platforms lack the training and/or resources they need to be effective	6%
Student safety platforms miss too many threats to student safety	4%
Our students do not experience any real threats to their safety	4%
We are concerned a student safety platform would endanger LGBTQ individuals by "outing" them	4%
Student safety platforms are not effective at keeping students safe	2%
We are concerned a student safety platform would contribute to the school to prison pipeline	2%

Conclusion

Survey results clearly suggest that most educators who use student safety platforms have a positive view of their impact and that they do not share concerns that are commonly raised about this technology:

- The vast majority of users say their platforms help keep students safe. For instance, 90 percent of Gaggle users and 79 percent of users of other vendors report that their platforms have helped prevent at least one suicide in the past two years,

- The vast majority of users (85 percent of Gaggle users and 72 percent of users of other platforms) also say their platforms help stop harassment of LGBTQ students. By contrast, a minority of users (11 percent of Gaggle users and 14 percent of users of other student safety platforms) say that their systems endanger LGBTQ students by "outing" them.

- Eighty-three percent of Gaggle users and 81 percent of users of other vendors believe their student safety platforms do not contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. One reason may be that users say the information provided by these platforms is relatively rarely used to punish students: Seventy percent of Gaggle users and 83 percent of users of other platforms say their safety alerts lead to disciplinary consequences for students at most a few times per semester.

- Finally, although users say they do place a high priority on student privacy, most are not concerned about their safety platforms violating that privacy. Seventy-nine percent of Gaggle users and 75% of users of other platforms agree with the statement that "student privacy is not an issue because their student safety platforms save student lives." Just 10 percent of respondents who do not use student safety platforms say it is due to student privacy concerns.

It is important to note that this survey cannot speak to the experiences of the students whose activities are monitored by these platforms because the respondents are all K-12 educators. Nor was it within the scope of this particular study to gather administrative data (such as discipline rates for students of color) that would allow for comparisons of key outcomes in districts that do and do not use safety platforms.

Rather, this study focuses on the lived experiences and perceptions of K-12 mental health professionals, principals, and district leaders who use student safety platforms. Because they work with these platforms day in and day out, their perspectives provide valuable information about a relatively new technology that is well on its way to becoming a ubiquitous feature of the K-12 student safety landscape. It is clear that the educators who responded to this survey are much more likely to view student safety platforms as the guardian angels of student and school safety than as big brother-like tools of surveillance.

About Gaggle

Gaggle has been supporting student safety and well-being for more than 23 years. Gaggle is the industry leader and pioneer in helping K-12 districts manage student safety on school-provided technologies.