

Building Effective Communications Around Student Data Privacy—PikMyKid

A team of graduate students examined current practices of a select group of education technology startups in the K-12 space around student data privacy issues. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, the team explored how each company develops public-facing communications regarding data use, privacy, and security policies. From analyzing the findings, the team garnered key insights and identified themes, which were used as a foundation for developing recommendations to the industry on building effective communications around student data privacy issues.

Key Findings

- Beyond complying with federal and state-level requirements, EdTech companies do not prioritize student data protections, as compared to customer acquisition and product development in their first five years.
- Due to factors such as limited resources and little demand from customers, EdTech companies do not establish formal strategies around public-facing communications about student data privacy for external stakeholders.
- Most EdTech companies use an open source, standardized privacy policy as a foundation for informing users about student data practices, which is customized as they scale up. Common practices include borrowing and/or adapting sections from competitors' privacy policies, as well as adding in sections based on customer demand and changes in federal or state-level requirements.
- Concerns about complying with privacy regulation and guidance do not seem to inhibit innovation at EdTech companies.

Recommendations

- In a rapidly evolving industry landscape, the process of improving privacy practices and communications in EdTech companies should be dynamic, as opposed to one-time or periodic.
Evaluation: PikMyKid was able to offer a clear explanation of their privacy practices and how they impacted ongoing product development questions. Unlike some companies included in our study, PikMyKid made a clear commitment to dynamic privacy considerations.
- As EdTech companies scale up, they should encourage a shared responsibility for staying vigilant about changing technical standards across team members, increasing awareness of data security practices and instilling a culture of respect for sensitive student data in staff.
Evaluation: PikMyKid appeared to meet good, common sense standards on technical questions related to data privacy relative to peer startups included in the study.
- Instead of taking a piecemeal approach to developing privacy practices over time, young companies should consider building front-end processes and standards that guarantee evolutionary flexibility downstream.
Evaluation: This recommendation came out of the success and value of PikMyKid's model. Relative to other companies in our study, PikMyKid clearly thought about its privacy imprint long before it had a client or a staff. In our review, this front-end consideration allowed PikMyKid to really stand out compared other companies in the study. Based on PikMyKid's choices, we broadened this recommendation to other startups in the educational technology space.
- EdTech companies should resist collecting or storing unnecessary student data and establish strong internal controls to preclude doing so.
Evaluation: PikMyKid demonstrated a clear commitment to limiting data collection relative to other companies in the study.
- EdTech companies should consider using strong and proactive public-facing communications about student data privacy as a product differentiator to stand out among competitors.
Evaluation: PikMyKid appeared to offer a safer product relative to some peer companies that relied on gathering location information directly from children. PikMyKid's decision to contrast themselves to competitors in this way was part of the model for this report-wide recommendation.

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