

(Over)protecting student privacy

Reasonable access to student data is beneficial to education research

On October 2, Michigan's state legislature introduced a bill that prohibits its public schools and school districts from collecting certain personal information about its students during homework, tests or other curricular assignments. Personal information, such as a student's socioeconomic status or place of birth, as well as physiological information, such as biometrics and facial-recognition markers, would be banned from collection. While the intention behind this bill to bolster students' rights to privacy is laudable, the outright ban of collecting potentially useful information is short-sighted and does a disservice to the schools and students.

Data about who students are and how students learn is immensely valuable for educational purposes. Researching educational methods through such data has yielded beneficial results for decades, such as giving us insight in cultural biases in testing, and figuring out what students are underperforming in such tests. Therefore, it's counterproductive to the learning processes of both educators and students to say that one area of information and its corresponding methods of information gathering isn't worth exploring. In fact, previous data collected from students have helped educators identify different learning styles and create environments that are able to address the diverse range of individuals in the public education system. The rise of "flipped classrooms," active learning environments and massive open online courses are evidence of research applications to improve the way students learn.

The introduction of the bill, H.B. 5044, may have more to do with debates over funding contested Common Core State Standards for education than with perceived privacy concerns. The bill was introduced by Rep. Tim Kelly (R-Saginaw), the chair of the subcommittee who spent this summer debating the merits of and finally working towards the implementation of the Common Core in Michigan. Going against his party line, Kelly appears to be introducing this bill to alleviate some concerns about the per-

ceived overreaching scope of the standards that Republicans in many states incorrectly view as limiting local control of schools. Despite the fact that the standards don't require data collection, there are those who fear students' rights may be trampled with its adoption.

Politics aside, the collection of students' personal information must be balanced with privacy concerns. No student should be required to provide any information to their school or school district if they're uncomfortable doing so. Often, this right to privacy isn't made explicit to students who may feel compelled to answer any question put before them. The introduction of new policy is a success insofar as it brings this topic of students' rights to the legislative agenda.

Where H.B. 5044 fails, however, is pitting useful situations against hypothetical problems. Due to the lack of real-world examples, those objecting to Common Core on the points which H.B. 5044 tries to address have exaggerated and unfounded concerns, going so far as to fear that students will be placed in MRI machines during tests. These speculative concerns do little to help students while the restriction against potential education research also does active harm. In order to enhance the state's education, students and educators should be given every available method, measure and process to help them learn from one another.