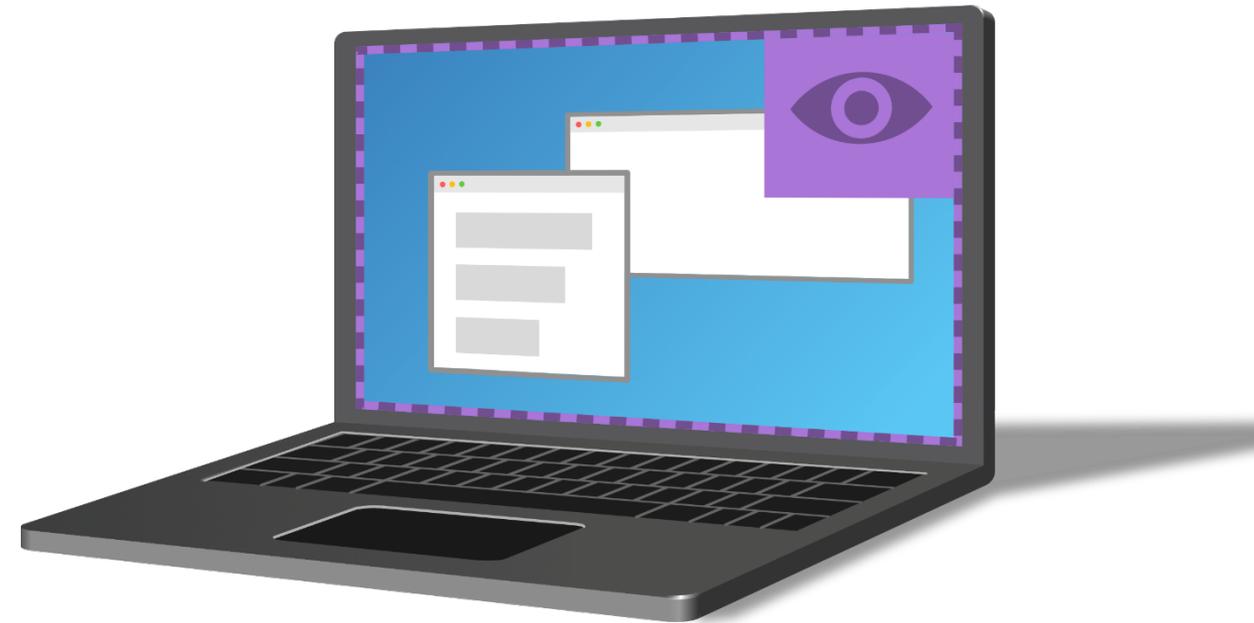


# VIEWS ON STUDENT ACTIVITY MONITORING SOFTWARE

Research and analysis from online surveys  
of teachers, parents, and students



*September 2021*

## Research Objectives

Measure teacher, parent, and student awareness of activity monitoring software and how it is used in schools, and gauge attitudes towards student activity monitoring among these audiences.

## Methodology

Online surveys of **1,001 3<sup>rd</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> grade teachers**, **1,663 K-12 parents**, and **420 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students** were fielded **June 2021**.

	<i>Sample size</i>	<i>Average Survey Time</i>
Teacher survey	1,001	16 minutes
Parent survey	1,663	19 minutes
Student (9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> ) survey	420	10 minutes

Throughout the report, **↑ and orange bolding** indicate significant differences between comparison groups at the 90% confidence level.

This survey study was commissioned by CDT and conducted by Edge Research.

- **Student activity monitoring software is widely used in K-12 schools.**
  - Teacher, parent, and student input indicates that monitoring software is much more commonly used on school-issued devices than personal devices.
  - Monitoring software provides a range of monitoring functionality to schools, which includes blocking inappropriate material, tracking logins to school apps, viewing students' screens in real-time, closing browser tabs, and taking direct control of input functionality.
  - Of teachers who indicate their school uses student activity monitoring software, only one in four report that monitoring is specifically limited to school hours — one in three report that monitoring takes place only on days that school is in session, and nearly as many (30 percent) say that student activity monitoring is conducted all of the time.
- **Teachers, parents, and students largely report that the benefits of student activity monitoring software outweigh the risks.**
  - Parents are broadly comfortable with the entire range of potential monitoring functionality.
  - Half of students express comfort with using the software, while one in four express discomfort. Students have mixed attitudes toward specific applications.
  - Teachers, parents, and students who report that their school (or, in the case of parents, their child's school) uses monitoring software are more likely to express comfort with its use.

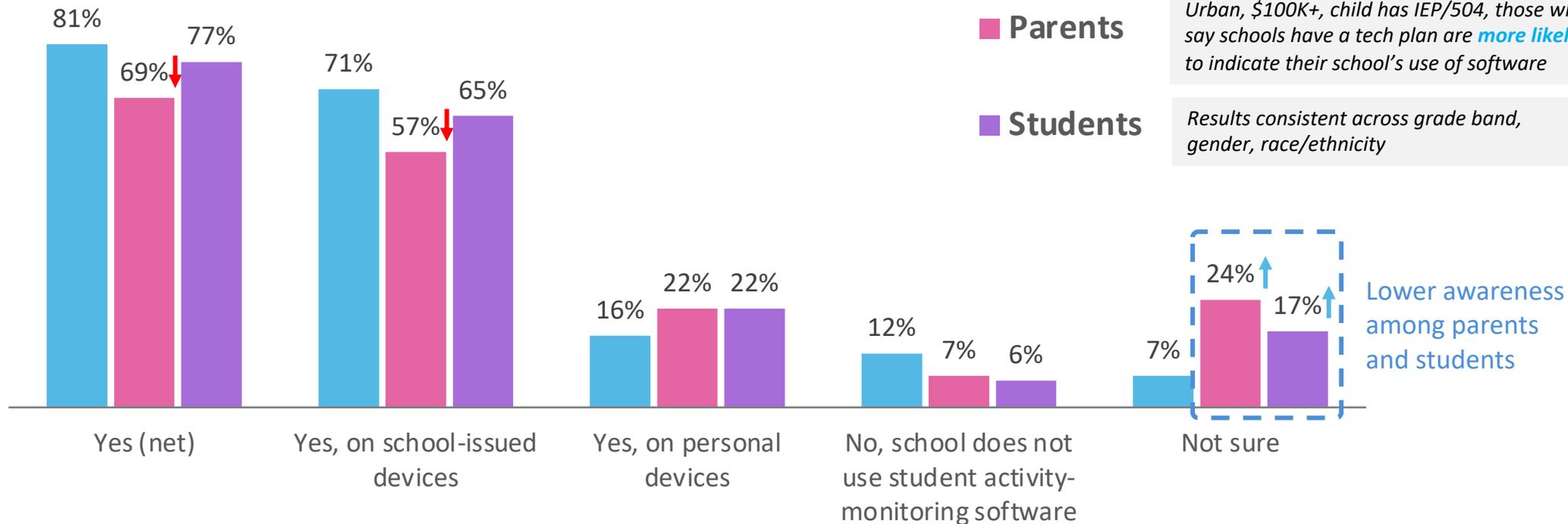
- **Nevertheless, teachers, parents, and students all express a range of privacy and equity concerns.**
  - Of students who indicate that their school uses monitoring software, many report a chilling effect on their behavior and self-expression online.
  - Some parents and teachers express concerns around the use of these tools, including concerns about disciplinary applications and potential risks of "outing" LGBTQ+ students.
  - Students express awareness of potential privacy and fairness implications around the use of this technology.

# Student Activity Monitoring Software is Widely Used

- Teachers, parents, and students all report consistently high use of student activity monitoring software by schools or districts.
- All three audiences report that monitoring software is much more commonly used on school-issued devices than personal devices.
- One in four parents do not know if their child’s school uses monitoring software.

## Use of Student Activity Monitoring Software

■ Teachers (n=1001) | ■ Parents (n=1663) | ■ Students (n=420)



# Monitoring Software Provides a Range of Functionality

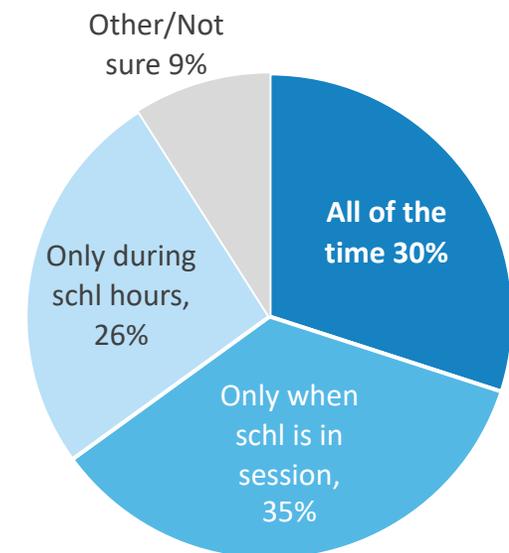
- Teachers report a variety of ways that student activity is monitored. The most common are blocking inappropriate material, tracking logins to school apps, and viewing students’ screen in real time; less common capabilities include closing browser tabs and taking direct control of input functionality.
- Teachers report a broader range of specific monitoring capabilities on school-issued devices than on personal devices.
- Only one in four teachers whose school uses student activity monitoring software report that its use is specifically limited to school hours.

Teachers: How Student Activity is Monitored			
School uses student activity monitoring software on →	School devices	Personal devices	School and personal devices
	<i>n=713</i>	<i>n=179</i>	<i>n=839</i>
Block obscene material (e.g. sex, alcohol)	65%	38%↓	61%
Track student logins to school applications	64%	37%↓	58%
View the contents of a student’s screen in real time	56%	42%↓	54%
Monitor or flag key word searches (e.g. accessing information on self-harm)	52%	53%	52%
Block non-educational material (e.g. YouTube)	51%	28%↓	47%
Track student logins to other applications (e.g. personal/not school-related)	45%	54%↑	47%
Close browser tabs when a student is not on-task	30%	19%↓	28%
Take control of student input functionality (e.g. cursor, keyboard input)	16%	9%↓	15%
Not sure	2%	2%	2%

↑ Indicates significant differences between percentages at the 90% confidence level or above

## Teachers: When Is Monitoring Software Active?

(n=839)



# Teachers and Parents: What is Monitoring Software Used For?

- Teachers and parents who indicate their schools use student activity monitoring differ in their perceptions of the primary ways in which these tools are applied.

Ways Student Activity Monitoring is Applied		
	Teachers	Parents
	Yes (NET) student activity monitoring	Yes (NET) student activity monitoring
<i>Teacher/parent base: school uses activity monitoring</i>	n=839	n=1147
Measure student engagement	56%↑	48%
Redirect student attention	47%↑	31%
Help conduct fair exams or assessments	47%	46%
Take attendance	44%	53%↑
Identify violations of disciplinary policy	43%	41%
Other	0%	0%
Not sure	5%	8%

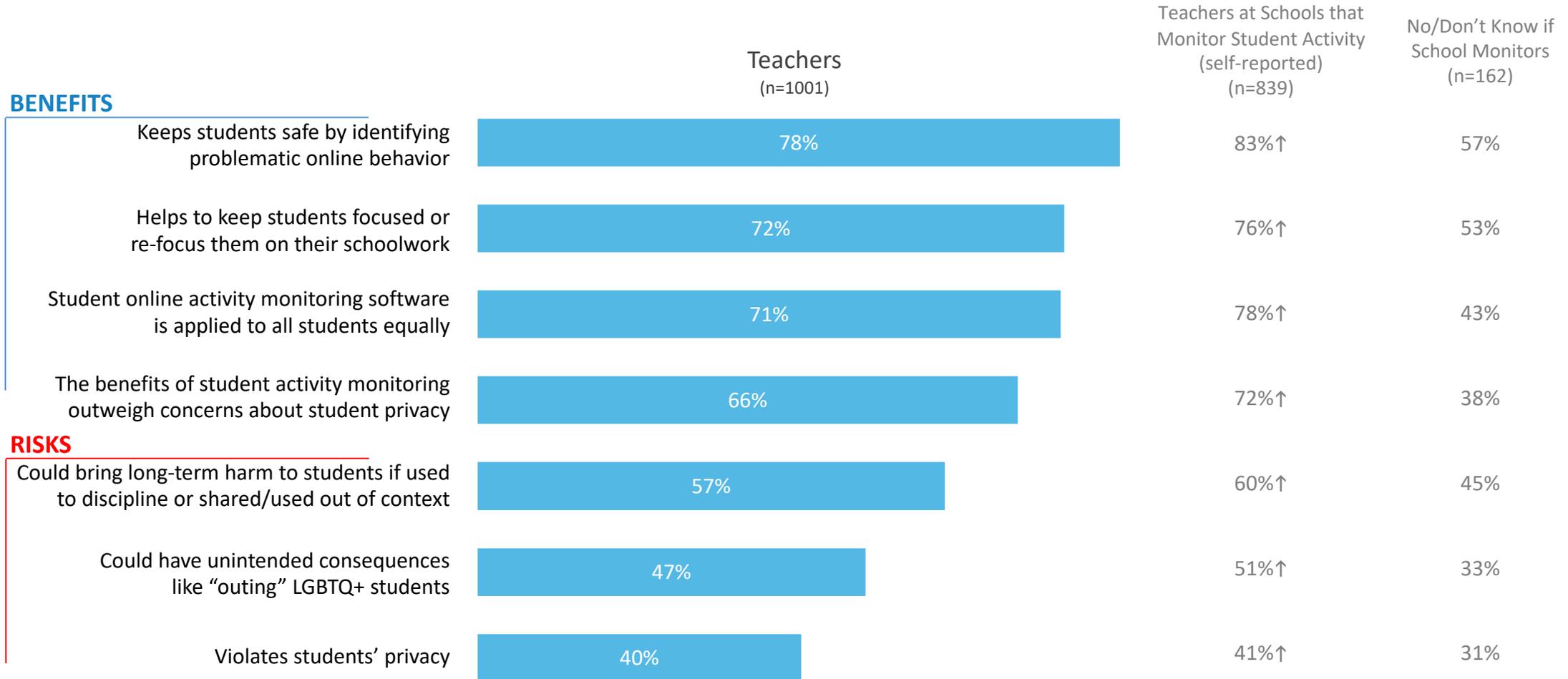
↑ Indicates significant differences between percentages at the 90% confidence level or above

Q42C: [TEACHERS] In which of the following ways does your school or district use student activity monitoring software? Select all that apply.

Q42C: [PARENTS] In which of the following ways does your school or district use student activity monitoring software? Select all that apply.

# Teachers: Benefits and Risks of Student Activity Monitoring

- Most teachers agree that the benefits of student activity monitoring outweigh the risks.
- However, teachers acknowledge privacy concerns involved with student activity monitoring, esp. for disciplinary use.
- Teachers at schools that monitor student activity are significantly more likely to agree with both the risks and benefits.



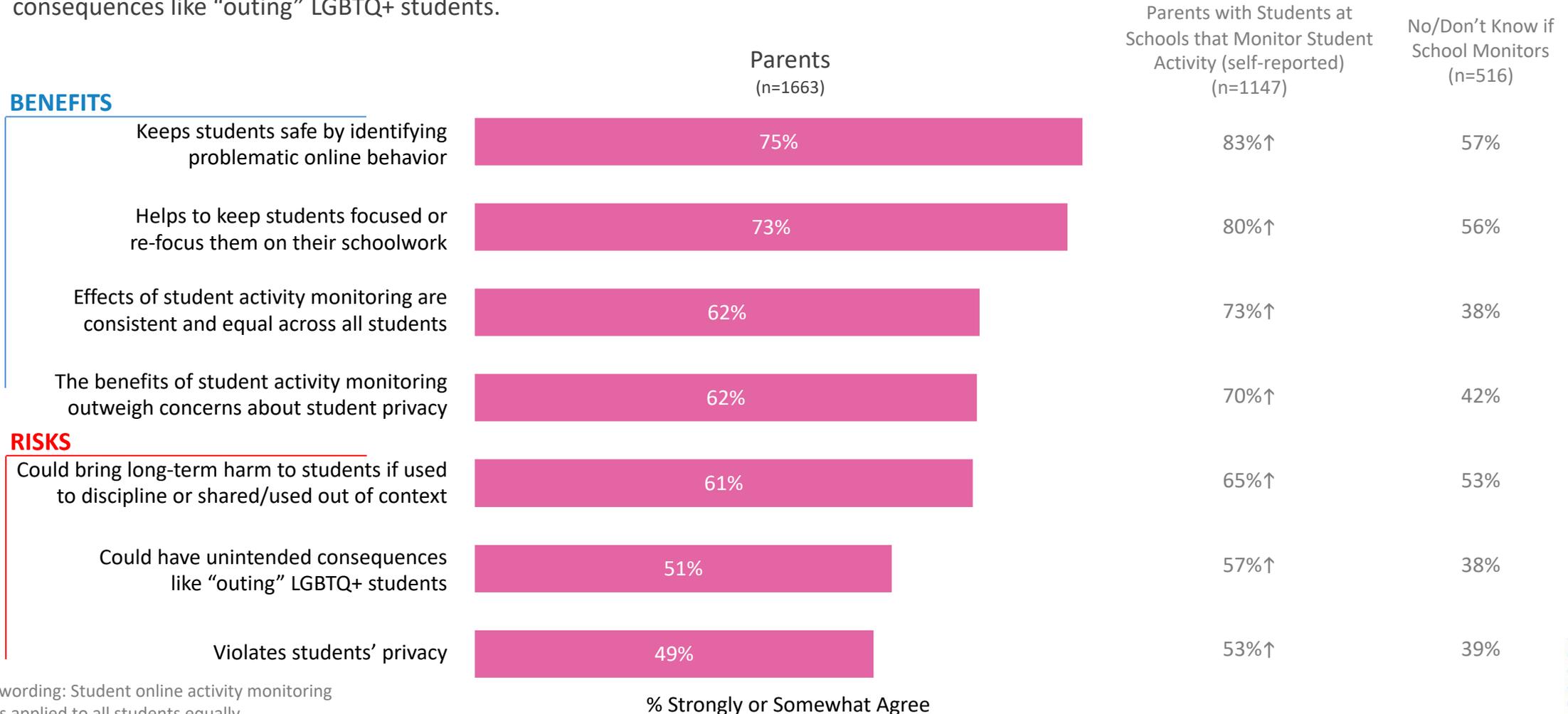
\*Parent wording: Effects of student activity monitoring are consistent and equal across all students

% Strongly or Somewhat Agree

Q42E. [TEACHERS] To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statements below related to schools monitoring students' online activity? ↑ Indicates significant differences between percentages at the 90% confidence level or above

# Parents: Benefits and Risks of Student Activity Monitoring

- Like teachers, most parents agree that the benefits of student activity monitoring outweigh concerns about this practice.
- Parents with students at schools that monitor student activity are more likely to agree with both the benefits and risks.
- Majorities of parents acknowledge risks associated with student activity monitoring like the use of data for disciplinary purposes and unintended consequences like “outing” LGBTQ+ students.



\*Teacher wording: Student online activity monitoring software is applied to all students equally

Q42E: [PARENTS] To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statements below related to schools monitoring students' online activity? ↑ Indicates significant differences between percentages at the 90% confidence level or above

# Monitoring Software Provides a Range of Functionality

- Parents are broadly comfortable with the entire range of potential tracking functionality.
- Parents at schools where student activity monitoring is taking place are more comfortable with all different kinds of tracking functionality.
- Students are mixed in their attitudes toward specific applications.

Parents' Comfort Level (top 2) by Monitoring Situation/Awareness				
School uses student activity monitoring software on →	School devices	Personal devices	School and personal devices	No / Don't Know
	n=948	n=367	n=1155	n=508
Block obscene material (e.g. sex, alcohol)	94%↑	84%	91%↑	83%
Track student logins to school applications	88%↑	83%	85%↑	68%
View the contents of a student's screen in real time	79%	78%	78%↑	51%
Monitor or flag key word searches (e.g. accessing information on self-harm)	90%↑	80%	87%↑	74%
Block non-educational material (e.g. YouTube)	85%↑	77%	83%↑	70%
Track student logins to other applications (e.g. personal/not school-related)	75%	73%	73%↑	50%
Close browser tabs when a student is not on-task	78%	79%	77%↑	57%
Take control of student input functionality (e.g. cursor, keyboard input)	67%	71%	67%↑	35%
Not sure	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Student Attitudes on Appropriate Uses of Monitoring Software		
School uses student activity monitoring software →	Yes, on all devices	No / Don't Know
	n=319	n=101
Measure student engagement	43%	38%
Redirect student attention	52%↑	27%
Help conduct fair exams or assessments	60%↑	41%
Take attendance	52%	54%
Identify violations of disciplinary policy	47%↑	31%
Other	0%	0%
Not sure	3%	15%↑

↑ Indicates significant differences between percentages at the 90% confidence level or above

Q42B: [PARENTS] How comfortable would you be with your child's school or district using monitoring software to do the following? (Top 2 = Very or Somewhat Comfortable)

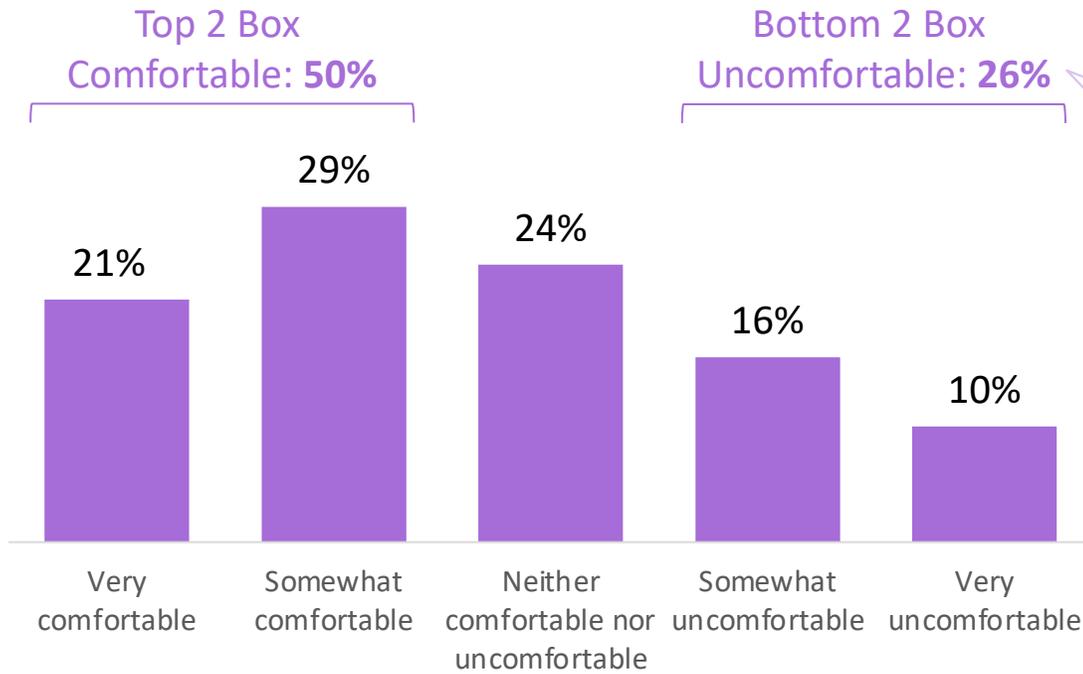
Q42C: [STUDENTS] Which of the following do you feel would be appropriate for your school to do using software that monitors student activity? Select all that apply.

# Half of Students Express Comfort With Monitoring Software

- Students span a range of comfort levels with activity monitoring software, with one in four students saying they are not comfortable with its use.
- Comfort level is slightly higher among students who report that their school uses activity monitoring software.

## Student Comfort with School Using Student Activity Monitoring Software

■ Students (n=420)



**56%** of those who indicate their devices are monitored are comfortable that their schools use the software to do so.

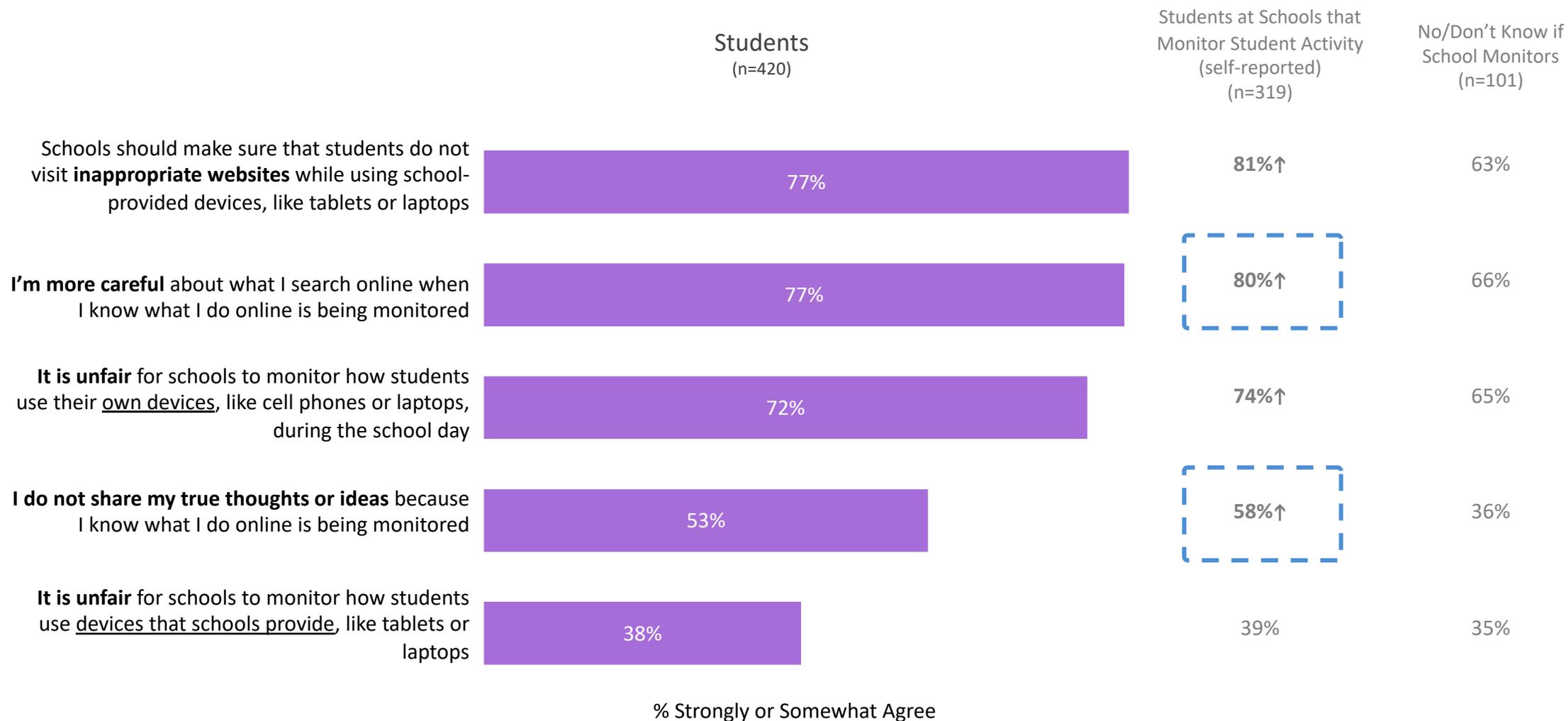
What makes you say you are or would be uncomfortable with your school using monitoring software to track student activity online? - (135 responses)

- 29% - It's a breach of my privacy
- 24% - It's creepy; feels like I'm being watched
- 15% - Concerned about accessing my personal data
- 8% - Impacts what I do online

*"The idea of schools being able to violate students' privacy with little to no pushback is concerning to me. It should not be tolerated for random adults to monitor children's personal devices without permission, and in some cases, knowledge of it." - Respondent*

# Some Students Report Reduced Self-Expression and Other Privacy Issues

- Students indicate some degree of self-censorship when they know their online activity is being monitored.
- Students are most likely to find student activity appropriate when it is used to monitor student use of inappropriate websites and when school-provided devices are being monitored (vs. personal devices).



# Contact Us

*Center for Democracy & Technology,  
Equity in Civic Technology Project*

[CivicTech@cdt.org](mailto:CivicTech@cdt.org)

The Center for Democracy & Technology (CDT) is a non-partisan, non-profit organization (headquartered in Washington, DC) that advocates for global online civil liberties and human rights, driving policy outcomes that keep the internet open, innovative, and free. The Equity in Civic Technology Project works to advance responsible civic technology use and strong privacy practices that protect the rights of individuals and families. If you want to learn more about CDT and our work, please visit our website: <https://cdt.org/>.