“Balancing Student Privacy with the Benefits of Ed Tech”

By Kerry Gallagher
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There is momentum building behind education policy in Washington these days. And with good reason. It has been nearly 15 years since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act and a lot has changed in our nation’s classrooms.

In addition to considering issues like accountability and teacher quality, federal policymakers are now thinking about the role of technology in school. One bill would add new regulations to the collection and use of student data. Another contemplates updates to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA).

Protecting student privacy is, of course, a paramount concern for teachers like me. Because the role of technology is essential in all of our lives, it is also increasing in our children's classrooms. This means we are creating more data and we must ensure that data is safeguarded. We must remember, though, that technology plays a critical role in helping teachers prepare students to intelligently consume and contribute now and as professionals.

As lawmakers consider the next generation of education policy priorities, I hope they will consider not just the risks, but the ways that teachers are using technology in the classroom to improve student results, to engage their students in new ways of thinking, and to reduce time spent on administrative tasks so that they can provide more, personalized attention to students.

If policy makers don’t know how teachers in their states and districts are using technology and data, they should ask. Teachers have valuable insights, and getting their perspective will lead to more thoughtful and meaningful legislation.

As a history teacher, technology plays an integral role in my classroom and curriculum. Not only are my students using lesson-enhancing technology to engage more deeply with content, but they are also learning a “digital fluency” that will prepare them for today’s increasingly tech-driven job market. The everyday use of technology in the classroom and at home is teaching students to be critical consumers and thoughtful producers, skills that both colleges and employers expect from today’s generation of students.

Over the past year, face-to-face video chats have provided my students with multiple opportunities to consult with and question experts from around the country and across an ocean. They’ve explored science and industry at a museum in the UK, chatted virtually with experts in the tech industry, and used simple online tools like video hangouts to collaborate with each other on homework assignments.

Technology helps to encourage and inspire my students – it gives me the tools to bring otherwise abstract concepts to life to deepen their understanding of history. It allows students to become creators – building a narrative through statistics and then designing an infographic, or pulling multimedia sources together to create videos that bring history to life, and sharing those videos with the class.

Technology has also made my work easier by simplifying how I communicate with my students and their parents. For example, I can use one app to send out text message reminders about approaching
assignment deadlines and another to create vocabulary study decks students can access on their smartphones from anywhere. These seemingly small enhancements have saved significant amounts of time.

Education technology has also allowed me to take my classes paperless. Long gone are the days of “my dog ate my homework”; now students can access and store everything digitally. Notes aren’t lost and students are no longer carrying around heavy backpacks bursting with folders and crumpled paper. And, given the rich primary source and multimedia resources available to educators, I’ve been able to go “textbook-free” too. Rather than read a single book by only one or two authors, my students are consuming content from leading scholars across the field they are studying.

Student privacy matters to educators and parents. Protecting and supporting my students and children is incredibly important to me. But the use of technology developed by experts for the classroom allows me to assess my student’s understanding, to provide feedback, and to create opportunities for my students to collaborate with one another in ways that were previously impossible.

I’m not arguing that there shouldn’t be strong measures in place to protect student data, but any changes to federal law and any new regulations that follow must ensure that teachers can still access the tools they need to help their students succeed. It’s an important balance to get right and I hope Congress and state legislators do it with much-needed teacher input.

Gallagher is a history teacher in Reading, Mass. and a lawyer by training. She was recently named a PBS 2015 Digital Innovator, is a regular panelist at education conferences and a contributor to education blogs like EdSurge and the Smarter Schools Project.