

# Students are being monitored by DMPS. What, why, and how?

Story/ O. Barnes

GoGuardian was installed on every student laptop this year. Many sources have called it spyware, but what is it really doing? The short answer; it's doing a lot, and it's going to expand soon.

School districts have been keeping an eye on their students since before students had laptops. This isn't a surprise to anyone. But in recent years, with online learning being shoved into the spotlight as a result of the pandemic, student's laptops have been the focus of increased district attention. Jump to today, with the pandemic dying down and students going to school in person. The new monitoring measures have stayed on student laptops, and many students don't know about how they are being watched.

Many school districts have started using services like GoGuardian to monitor students and their online activity. Des Moines Public Schools partnered with them in May 2022 and the software has been mandatory for students since then. GoGuardian gives teachers tools to keep students on task or see their screens, and that's its main purpose, but it goes beyond just that. It looks at student's web activity, what they're downloading, the time they're spending on certain websites and apps, encompassing most of the activity on a laptop with GoGuardian installed.

"Monitoring is not new, it's just a new product that's been implemented," DMPS Director of Technology Lisa Irey said.

According to Irey, e-mails and Microsoft Teams chats have been searchable by DMPS admin since before GoGuardian was implemented. The district has had ways of monitoring students digitally for years, and that's just been expanded upon with new software in recent months. Its introduction was a joint effort within DMPS, involving departments that oversee technology, teaching and learning, and student wellness. Go-

Guardian has a separate product called Beacon that aims to protect students by scanning chats and e-mails for words that could indicate self-harming or violent ideas and is currently being implemented by DMPS.

"I get why they do it, but I feel like they shouldn't do it when I'm not at school," Sophomore Cassidy Quinn said.

Now onto the most important info; what can DMPS and GoGuardian see? As previously mentioned, the district can search e-mails and Teams messages sent by people in the district. They can also see your screen and web activity. Most importantly, GoGuardian collects and stores data on DMPS students. This student data can't be sold to third parties, and must be destroyed when they graduate, as that's part of the agreement between DMPS and GoGuardian. As Chrome isn't compatible with GoGuardian, Chrome is no longer used on student laptops. As of right now, GoGuardian's Beacon product isn't active on student laptops, but it is being worked on and will likely activate in coming months.

"I think that DMPS has done a good job balancing student safety and privacy, and addressing concerns from our community," Irey said.

Once Beacon is fully integrated, it will come with it's own new components for monitoring students; most notably, automated web activity analysis and message/e-mail scanning to search for words indicating self-harming or violent ideas. The focus of Beacon is to watch for signs that students are suffering from mental illness and may need support from counseling and therapy staff. To accomplish this goal, district observation of students will again increase.



Photo/ O. Barnes

Students are feeling spied on in their classrooms and hallways. Some are aware of DMPS monitoring them, and some have no clue.

"I knew that they watched what apps I did. I thought it was reasonable just to make sure everything was school appropriate, but I feel like they take it a little too far," Sophomore Kylee Ashley said.

Generally, when interviewed, students knew they were being monitored by the district, but didn't know how it was done, what was being seen, or what was done with the information gathered. Some students reported being made uncomfortable by DMPS tracking their actions, but despite that, it's near certain that GoGuardian will stay on student laptops. "It makes me uncomfortable that the school is watching me,"

## A brief history of GoGuardian

### 2014

Aza Steel, Advait Shinde, and R. Todd Mackey launch GoGuardian.

### 2015-2017

GoGuardian is rolled out to over 600,000 students in deal with LA Unified School District.

GoGuardian for Teachers is launched. Google Classroom integration for GoGuardian is announced.

### 2018-Present

GoGuardian launches Beacon, a program that watches for trigger words related to self-harm. DMPS partners with GoGuardian and integrates it into all student laptops.

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it a little too far.” - Sophomore Kylee Ashley