RETHINKING VIDEO MANDATES IN ONLINE CLASSROOMS:
Privacy and Equity Considerations and Alternative Engagement Methods

The onset of COVID-19 caused the education system to shift rapidly. Vibrant, in-person classrooms transformed into dynamic online environments to protect the community's safety. This change challenged educators and students to engage with their work and each other in novel ways, including through online classrooms using video conferencing platforms. For educators, seeing their students' faces on the screen during these calls is the closest alternative to in-person learning; and for students, seeing the faces of their classmates helps them feel connected during isolating times. However, unique privacy and equity considerations arise when students are required to turn on their video streams during class. This document highlights privacy and equity considerations that emerge when students are required by districts to use video in online classrooms and explores alternative ways to measure student engagement that account for these concerns.

Mandating video poses privacy concerns.

Many privacy considerations arise when video is mandated in online classrooms including conflating students' school and home lives, implying lack of trust in students, and increasing data collection.

Mandating video can conflate students' home and school lives, and requires students to provide a window into their private lives.
For most students, online learning blurs the line between home and school by literally bringing school into their homes. This intrusion does not exist when learning occurs in person. Online learning that requires video participation exacerbates this conflation of school and home by providing a window into students' private home lives for educators and classmates to see. Mandating video usage could be akin to requiring the entire class to take a field trip to each student's home, allowing the class to see students' most intimate spaces with no choice to opt out. Video mandates can result in students revealing more information about their private lives—what kind of living situation they are in, who they live with, and their family make-up—than they want to. This raises serious privacy concerns for students and can harm their developing identities, as students may feel the need to hide parts of themselves and their surroundings if they know eyes are on them.

Mandating video can imply lack of trust and cause students to feel surveilled.
Requiring video can make students feel they are constantly being watched. Research shows[1] that when students feel surveilled by their school, it creates feelings of apprehension and resentment towards the school. This "surveillance effect" also has implications for privacy, expression, and association. Students who feel surveilled may feel the need to censor themselves from voicing certain opinions, speaking with certain classmates, and other expressive behavior. Further, this sense of being monitored can make students feel that they are not trusted, convey the expectation that they have less ownership over their education, and send the signal that if video is off it is for a mischievous reason. Students also

may feel as if they no longer have the freedom to make mistakes because the video stream captures every moment of class, including students' every response, in ways that in-classroom learning does not. Making mistakes and feeling free to express oneself are crucial aspects of identity development, and video mandates can harm this.

Mandating video can lead to increased data collection.

Any student data collection creates risks to student privacy, even though many instances of data collection are beneficial and necessary. When video is used in online classrooms, personal information such as students' names, email addresses, and birthdates, among other information, is often required to create an account. Biometric information and device information is also collected through the video stream. Before mandating video, educators, districts, and local decision-makers should consider the data collected as a result of the mandate, and whether this collection is necessary to achieve their desired outcome. Often this involves contemplating worst-case scenarios, such as the harms that would result to students in the event their data is compromised. These risks include using the data for purposes other than the collector's original purpose (known as secondary use); hacks or data breaches, which can negatively impact students by putting their data in the hands of bad actors; and using the data to amass profiles on students to predict their behavior or affect their outcomes. Data collection becomes even more prevalent when video platforms not intended for educational settings are used in schools. These tools often collect more data than necessary from students, which can lead to harmful secondary uses and privacy violations. Requiring video can also result in the collection of non-student data. Parents, siblings, pets, and others in the home who are not enrolled in the class may come into the frame, thereby affecting both their and the student's privacy.

Mandating video raises equity concerns.

In addition to privacy concerns, requiring video can lead to equity considerations that are less prevalent or non-existent when learning occurs in person. These considerations include exacerbating inequities, fostering social harm, and creating problems for marginalized student populations.

Mandating video can highlight haves and have-nots, and deepen existing inequalities.

In-person learning allows a neutral classroom setting that provides a relatively equal learning environment for all students who enter the classroom, regardless of where they came from that morning. Mandating video in online classrooms allows all participants to see students, their surroundings, and home lives. This can allow others to draw inferences about students' wealth or lack thereof. For students who are in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or who share a home with many others, mandating video might not be feasible and could reveal intimate details of home life, replacing an aspect of uniformity otherwise afforded to these students in in-person learning. For example, students who previously enjoyed privacy regarding their living situations who are experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of being evicted could have their situations revealed to classmates simply because moving boxes or bags are visible in their background, or because they attend class from a different location each day.

Mandating video implicates issues surrounding the digital divide and bandwidth constraints.

Students may be unable to comply with video mandates due to technical limitations, such as internet connection speeds and bandwidth constraints, which are often out of their control. This issue affects many students regardless of where they fall on the digital divide but is often more prevalent for under-resourced students.[2] Many students or their families cannot afford home internet connections and rely on hotspots or other connection tools loaned to them by their district or local telecom company to connect for class. Using these tools often means slower internet connection speeds which may not

support video. Students without reliable internet at home may have to search for free Wi-Fi, and may log in from places such as local coffee shops, libraries, or even parking lots to access a connection capable of engaging in class. Some students may not have a device capable of video, or may share a device with others in their home. Video mandates highlight these disparities. Regardless of wealth, students in rural areas with less internet infrastructure may also struggle to have enough bandwidth to comply with video mandates. Additionally, it is common to have multiple school-aged children within the same household. When there are multiple online learners within the home, bandwidth constraints may not make video use feasible. Students may feel left out or ostracized if they cannot participate when video is mandated due to these limitations.

Mandating video can lead to social harm.
Although educators can (and should) warn students against recording and taking photos of other students during online classes, this is impossible for educators to monitor and enforce effectively. Students can use their own devices to record and photograph other students' video streams, including their private spaces and behavior. If students record these intimate learning moments and post them to social media platforms, this can lead to bullying and other harms. Even if students do not record their classmates, being able to see students' living situations can lead to stigmatization, bullying, and isolation. Requiring video exposes students to attacks by bullies and bad actors in unprecedented ways, with little ability for students themselves to control the situation. Finally, it is important to remember that students are often experiencing incredible amounts of stress due to online learning, as well as outside factors intensified by the pandemic. Mandating video can add additional stress to an already taxing environment.

Mandating video poses special considerations for marginalized students.
Although using video can help students and educators feel connected, mandating video is not the best tool to reach all students. Video offers little benefit for visually impaired students. Additionally, if educators use video to measure or create engagement, various factors may cause students to appear disengaged when this is not actually the case. English language learners or students who rely on tools to process audio or visual cues may not appear engaged on video because they are looking at numerous screens to translate or assist them with their learning. In classrooms, educators can more easily identify these scenarios than they can during online learning. Video provides a viable option for engaging in the often-isolating online learning environment, but mandating video and using only video as an engagement method raises concerns.

Before mandating video:

Video provides many benefits, including allowing students and educators to feel connected during isolating times. However, when video use is required, privacy and equity concerns arise.[3] Before districts or educators mandate video use, there are a number of alternatives and considerations that should be explored.

Consider alternatives to create and measure classroom engagement.
There are many alternatives to help educators create a dynamic learning environment, allow students to engage with peers and educators, and measure engagement that do not require mandating video. For example, to determine whether students comprehend material, educators can use quizzes at the end of lessons instead of attempting to gauge students' reactions through video while simultaneously teaching. Educators can also encourage students to respond and interact with material in different ways, including through "reactions" or emojis, which most video conferencing platforms have and which can be used when video is not on. Using avatars is another option that encourages creative expression and allows teachers to feel as though they are not teaching to blank squares, but also retains privacy

protections. Enabling students' chat features is also a more privacy- and equity-friendly engagement method. Educators can facilitate relationship building by opening online classrooms a few minutes early or keeping them open a few minutes after class to allow students to speak with peers and/or educators on their own terms. Students may choose to use video in class even when not mandated, especially if educators cultivate a welcoming environment. Another option is pre-recording class so that it is conducted asynchronously. When students are able to access recordings of classes on their own time, it can mitigate connection and device issues and can also make class more accessible for marginalized students. Another common justification for video mandates is that they can be used for attendance purposes. In some states, such as North Carolina and Missouri, some schools have moved from tracking attendance daily to tracking attendance every three days, making notations of three-day trends in absences. When a three-day absence occurs, Remote Learning Partners are notified to reach out to the family to determine if they need support. Asking families what needs they have can help schools identify reasons for attendance issues and is often more beneficial than requiring video.

Consider privacy and equity throughout the process.
Mandating video creates massive amounts of data collection and documents deeply personal aspects of students' home lives, without much upside. Before mandating video for students, districts and educators should weigh the benefits and risks posed to privacy and equity. Districts or educators should create policies or codes of conduct in their online classrooms, including specific parameters to curb potential bullying and address privacy and equity risks. Educators can emphasize that they want to use video not because they do not trust students or because they wish to see students' every move, but because they want to foster a more engaging classroom environment akin to in-person learning. However, even if video is required, it cannot replicate an in-person learning environment. Thus, districts and educators should explore alternatives for creating classroom engagement with fewer privacy and equity pitfalls.

Teach students about privacy and how to ingrain it into their online lives.
With the shift to online learning, it is more important than ever to teach students safe online practices, including the role they play in protecting their own privacy. This includes teaching students to be aware of when they are revealing information about themselves and when data is being collected about them so that they can be aware of their online footprint. Districts and educators should teach students about the implications of sharing personal information and its potential consequences for their future outcomes and sense of privacy. Students should also learn to adjust settings within products and services to be more privacy-protective, including to minimize data collection, data sharing, and third-party tracking. Educators can also help students retain their privacy in online learning environments by teaching them to use virtual backgrounds, mute microphones when not speaking, use avatars to represent themselves, and other methods that allow students to feel less seen or intruded upon, which ultimately helps protect their privacy.

Endnotes

1   J. William Tucker and Amelia Vance, School Surveillance: The Consequences for Privacy and Equity, Education Leaders Report, (October 2016),https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED582102.pdf.

2   National Education Association, The Digital Divide and Homework Gap in Your State, (October 16, 2020). https://perma.cc/A57X-5WPW; National Education Association and Public Policy Associates Incorporated, Digital Equity for Students and Educators, (September 2020). https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/NEA%20Report%20-%20Digital%20Equity%20for%20Students%20and%20Educators_0.pdf

3   National Education Association Center for Education Justice, What Our Students Need Now: Virtual School Culture that is Healthy, Just and Strong, (October 23, 2020), https://perma.cc/SP2A-WK24.