

Message from the BCTF to parents about student data and MyEducation BC

Disasters with student data have been in the news recently. It has come to light that the Ministry has lost an unencrypted hard drive with information on 3.4 million students, teachers and, in some cases, parents from as far back as 1986. At the same time, a new student information system, MyEducation BC, is being implemented by the Ministry of Education.

The lack of required care for data brings to the surface important issues the education system as a whole needs to address. Parents need to know that the information about their children is accurate, protected, and accessible only to those who have legitimate access to that information.

Here are some important questions about student data and MyEducation BC:

1. What data is necessary to collect?

The first action in protecting data should be determining whether the data is necessary. New technologies make it possible to collect massive amounts, often called “big data.” That data can then be linked to other databases. All this connected data can be “data mined,” using algorithms to process it. A legitimate question is whether we want to collect massive data in the first place. And if we do, should we be linking it across databases?

2. What is MyEducation BC and what are some of the initial problems with it?

MyEducation BC is the new student information system that the Ministry of Education is implementing. The system has been in the news because of huge problems in making it work. It is operating very slowly—taking many minutes to enter a single piece of data. At the end of the first month of school, some students still didn’t have their timetables, and teachers did not have a class list of their students. The need to redo work by hand because of so many computer delays means that a great deal of teaching and learning time is being unnecessarily lost.

3. What other dangers are there in the data collection of MyEducation BC?

When MyEducation BC eventually gets to working properly, which it likely will at some future date, other data dangers will face parents, students, and teachers.

The plan for MyEducation BC calls for a mass of data to be collected and stored in the program. It is not just the usual—student demographics, courses taken, grades achieved, photos of students, parent/guardian contact information. The plan for the program is for students to upload projects and videos, teachers to provide formative assessment information about individual students, to have email within the system, to build portfolios of student work over the K-12 years, to hold individual education plans for students with special needs, and to record behaviour issues and discipline—all in a single database. This could raise a number of red flags for parents.

4. What are “data-based instruction” and “personalization”?

Those promoting the use of these new technologies claim that education could be improved through “data-based instruction.” There is much talk about “personalization,” which generally means using the computer to design a pathway through learning.

There are many questions about this approach, with evidence that this kind of “personalization” often produces isolation. True personalization should be about relationships of teacher and student working together on the education pathway for the student, rather than following what is really a standardization determined by computer algorithms.

5. Will MyEducation BC be linked to other databases?

An element of using “big data” is linking across databases with different types of information on the same person. One of the announced uses for MyEducation BC seems to link with the data from the integrated case management system in the Ministry of Social Development. This may be a long-term dream. However, the social services database has had technology problems similar to those in MyEducation BC from its first day online. Even if it were desirable, the time to make these huge, centralized databases provide limits, at least in the short run. Once again, the goal for collecting and linking all this data across databases may be to provide better services from government. However, the collection of this data raises other issues that should be the subject of public debate.

6. What concerns should parents have about data of their children and, in some cases the family, being linked to other databases?

There is a real possibility of linked data getting released inappropriately, with information that may not even be correct, because it hasn't been verified. Lost hard drives and failure to encrypt are only a couple of dangers.

With more security measures in place than one can imagine, data from the National Security Agency in the U.S. was released publicly by a former employee, Edward Snowden. He simply downloaded it and released it on the internet. In British Columbia, police officers have been fired because they went looking for data on individuals, even though they had no right to it.

7. How many people will have access to MyEducation BC?

One million people! That's right, one million!

Besides 40,000 teachers, counsellors, all administrators and support staff, the plan calls for every student from Grade 6 to Grade 12 and every parent and guardian to be able to get into MyEducation BC through a web browser. Access is supposed to be authenticated by a single “service card” that everybody in BC will have. This is the same card that will be used for medical services, driver's licence, police incidents, social services, and any other provincial government services.

8. What other questions need to be asked about data and education?

Even if all the technical problems currently causing a data disaster are solved, many other important questions need to be addressed. The issues are important enough that a research project has been started on “big data.” BC Privacy Commissioner Elizabeth Denham says “This project will probe big-data surveillance and analyze its scope, effectiveness and implications.”

How much data do we want to be kept on our children?

How do we want data to be used to make decisions affecting important areas of our lives?

Do we agree with linking our personal data, health records, social services records, and educational data so they can be “mined” to determine important aspects of our lives?

Who do we want to have access to our data and how can access be protected from others?

These issues are not just about what data we keep on our children and how it gets used. They are fundamentally about the kind of society we want.