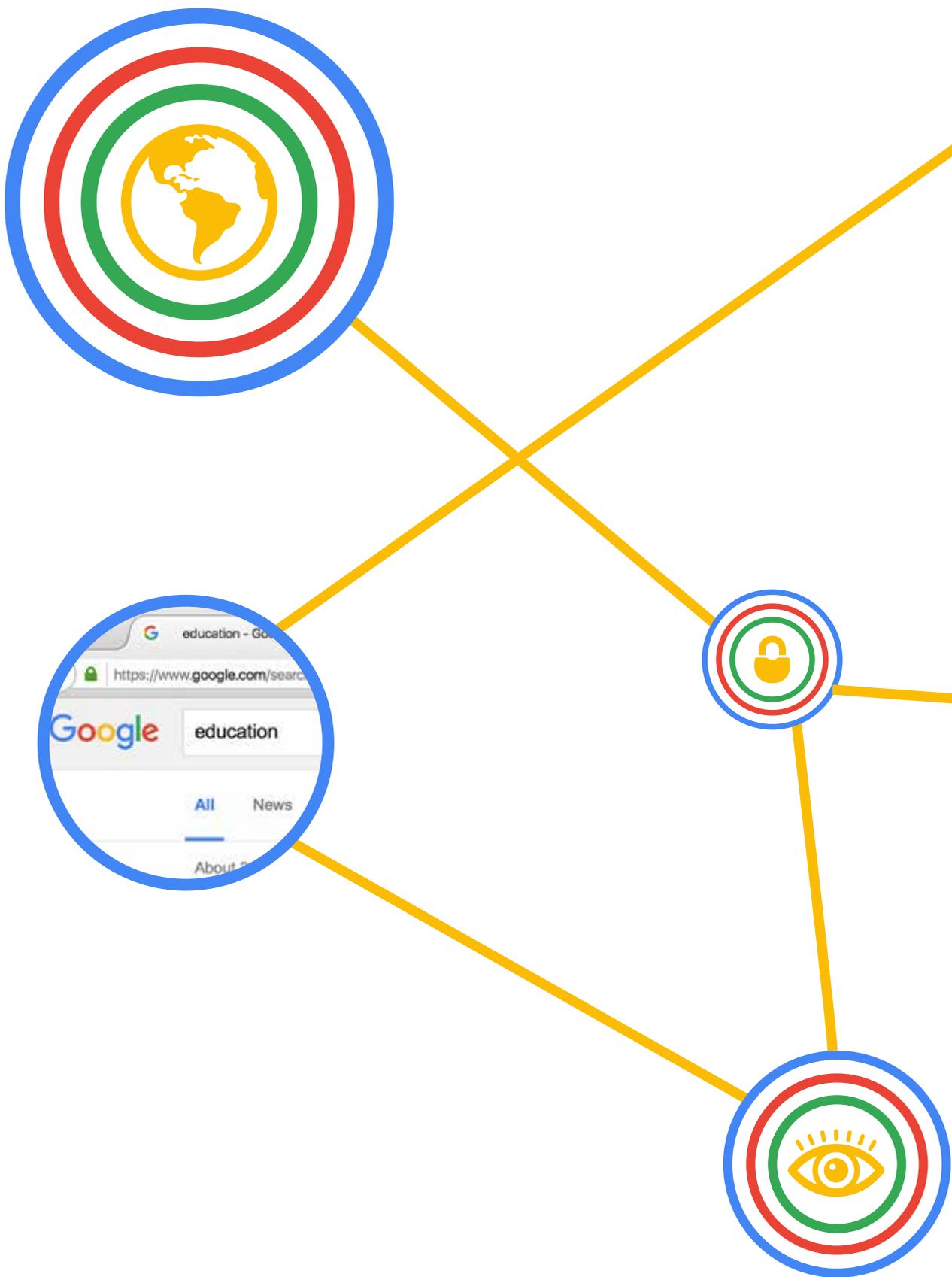
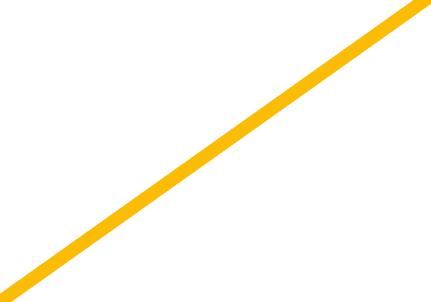


# FEATURE





GOING  
Google



Privacy Considerations  
in a Connected World

**Marty Bray**

## Introduction

Forsyth County Schools (FCS) is a rapidly growing school district just north of Atlanta, Georgia. It has approximately 45,000 students and is one of the top-ranked school districts in the state with a graduation rate of 94 percent and test scores to match this excellent graduation rate. The district has long been known as a leader in the area of educational technology. It has been a Bring Your Own Technology (BYOT) system for approximately ten years and was one of the first systems to have interactive whiteboards installed in every classroom. Roughly two years ago FCS decided to formally adopt Google Apps for Education as one of the many digital resources that it offers its students. Google Apps for Education (GAFE) is a widely used service offered by Google to school districts for free. In addition to e-mail, Google offers its suite of productivity tools including Docs, Sheets, and Slides and unlimited

storage in its cloud-based service known as Google Drive.

Prior to adopting GAFE, FCS had allowed various teachers and schools around the district to use GAFE, even though the service had not been formally adopted. This use on an individual or school-wide basis came about because of a change in FCS technology leadership and because of the inconsistent and siloed use of GAFE around the system. The piecemeal use of this resource suite meant that one of GAFE's greatest strengths, collaboration, could not be fully realized across the district. It also meant that the district and its students were potentially vulnerable if GAFE was misused. Central to this vulnerability was the potential compromise of student privacy. How FCS went about mitigating risk in this area for the district and its students is the subject of this article.

## Planning, Planning, Planning

Of course, planning is central to the implementation of any new initiative. As mentioned previously, GAFE was allowed to take hold and grow organically in the system. Therefore, one of the FCS starting points was to find out how its own schools were already using GAFE for instruction. Getting this information was critical to making sure that the policies and procedures implemented at the district level did not adversely affect teachers' instructional workflow while at the same time ensuring student privacy. Assessing how GAFE was being used in the schools was also a part of the planning process for implementation district wide.



One of the challenges that educational technology directors face when adopting GAFE is the perception that Google mines student data for advertising.

A critical part of FCS's academic success is strong support from parents and the community. Many members of this educationally focused community work in the information technology field; they are not strangers to the issues surrounding data privacy. With that parental awareness in mind, FCS had to ensure that Google's stance on data privacy was in line with community expectations. The leadership at FCS spent a great deal of time surveying other districts to help determine the policies and procedures being used to protect student privacy. One Georgia district that was consulted had been using GAFE for several years and is an established model of the successful adoption of GAFE. A second district, which is out of state, was also consulted as they were in the process of a major Chromebook adoption and had extensive experience with GAFE. In addition, the district hired a consultant to come in and assist with setting up the district dashboard. During this process the consultant could ensure that the settings were properly configured in the dashboard and could then make additional recommendations to staff about ways to improve the security of the system.

### Google's Stance on Privacy

One of the challenges that educational technology directors face when adopting GAFE is the perception that Google mines student data. In this interconnected world this is a legitimate concern that is complicated by Google's use of user data to display advertising when people take advantage of Google's free and publicly available services such as Gmail. Of course, any district should carefully review any agreement it signs with a vendor to determine if student data could be subject to illegal mining. After careful review of the GAFE

agreement, FCS is confident that no student data is being used for anything other than educational and usability purposes. FCS will continue to monitor GAFE's use of data as it does with all digital resources used by the district.

In December 2015 Jonathan Rochelle, Director of Google Apps for Education, posted an overview of Google's stance on student data privacy (see <http://googleforeducation.blogspot.com/2015/12/the-facts-about-student-data-privacy-in.html>). Basically, GAFE does not collect any student data for the purpose of resale, advertising, or sharing with any entity outside of the district. Data is collected to improve usability and create an experience for the student that reduces focus on technology and increases focus on learning and collaboration. The example given in the article was the use of Chrome Sync to provide students with easy access to all of their tools and resources. Without this tool precious instructional time would be spent in the classroom working on the technology rather than learning and creating. The article concludes by stating that the school system has full control over the use of these features and whether or not they are being used. It is important to re-emphasize that it is critical for any school system contemplating adoption of any digital resource to review all agreements and ensure that any user data collected is used only to facilitate instruction and conforms with community expectations.



Not only should we provide students with access to resources, but we must also educate them about how to use those resources effectively and safely.



### Implementation

When Forsyth County Schools began the implementation, several schools around the district were pilot sites. These pilots were used to determine not only security settings but also to fine-tune settings in the GAFE administration site. Based on all of this planning, FCS made several decisions about student access to GAFE. First, with the exception of e-mail, core GAFE services (Docs, Sheets, and Slides) would be made available to everyone in the district. E-mail services would be made available only to high school students and only within GAFE. This means that high school students cannot use their GAFE accounts to e-mail anyone outside of the FCS domain. It is important to note that FCS already uses a learning management system (its learning) for messaging services; therefore, the focus of GAFE implementation has been on collaboration rather than messaging.

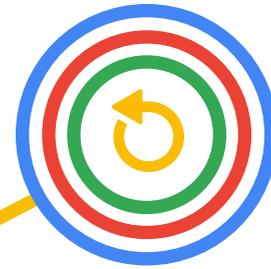
FCS also allows the use of Google services such as Hangouts and Classroom to meet the instructional needs of the district's educators and students. At each school, the instructional media specialist (IMS) and instructional technology specialist (ITS) make local decisions about issues such as how Chromebooks will be assigned and what applications will be made available to their school community. The IMS/ITS team also helps teachers and students with implementation and training.

As with any technical system, consistent—and continuing—monitoring and adjustments are necessary to meet the instructional needs of the schools while ensuring that privacy is maintained. To help make future decisions about GAFE, FCS has charged the system media committee with the review of policies and procedures so that members can make recommendations to the technology department. This

process not only gives the technology department better guidance but also promotes stakeholder buy-in and communication about technology and its use in the district.

FCS has also implemented a Responsible Use Policy (RUP) instead of an Acceptable Use Policy (AUP). The distinction is subtle but important, since the RUP does not try to closely define all of the situations that might arise from irresponsible use of technology and then enumerate consequences for violating the policy. Instead, it broadly defines the responsible use of technology and puts the responsibility for appropriate use of technology on the user. To see FCS's RUP visit [www.forsyth.k12.ga.us/Page/40831](http://www.forsyth.k12.ga.us/Page/40831).

FCS recently finished a general system-wide security audit and, at the time of this writing, is in the process of doing a security audit specifically for GAFE. Again, given



the rapid rate at which technology changes, periodic audits to find and mitigate security vulnerabilities are critical. A good security audit not only makes technical recommendations about vulnerabilities but also helps the organization look at policies and procedures that can themselves create security vulnerabilities. Historically, technology departments have tended to make decisions that may mitigate security vulnerabilities but may also have a negative impact on workflow and instruction. It is important that the stakeholders in the organization have a voice in deciding how to respond to security vulnerabilities and decide what risks are acceptable and which are not in an increasingly connected instructional environment.

### Balance Is the Thing

With all of the current concerns about data breaches, it would be easy to fall back on familiar models of instruction that have

proven safe in the past. If these models were taken to their logical conclusion, then no computer should be networked and no instructional resources we provide for our students should be web-based. Unfortunately, our students do not live, nor will they work, in this type of insular world, and so it is our responsibility to leverage the power of a connected instructional environment to help them succeed now and in the future. Not only should we provide them with access to resources, but we must also educate them about how to use those resources effectively and safely. When conforming with a mandate that all districts put an Internet safety program into place, we would do a huge disservice to our students if we just filter content and not help our students understand how to safely use the Internet. From my perspective, it is the responsibility of the school librarian to take the lead in this area.



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work in Forsyth County, he was a professor at the University of West Georgia, California State University—Fullerton, and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He has a total of twenty-five years of experience in a number of educational settings. His PhD from Indiana University is in instructional systems technology; he also has education degrees from Appalachian State University. He is the author or coauthor of several books, book chapters, and journal articles on the uses of technology in education, especially as it relates to issues of diversity.