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More Details on InBloom's Plans for Student Data

by Audrey Watters on 04 Apr, 2013

There has been an incredible amount of hype and fear and confusion and excitement surrounding inBloom, a Gates Foundation-funded initiative to build a new data infrastructure for public schools. One such promise: better interoperability will streamline schools' handling of data. Another promise: more access to student data will help companies build tools to "enhance personalized learning." One major fear: more thorough data capture and data processing will result in an unprecedented invasion of student privacy.

InBloom, which had its formal launch at SXSWedu, boasts 9 states (Delaware, Massachusetts, Colorado, Louisiana, New York, Illinois, North Carolina, Georgia, and Kentucky) that will pilot the program. Many companies are on board too, with plans to use and integrate inBloom data. These include Amazon, Clever, Compass Learning, Dell, eScholar, Goalbook, Kickboard, LearnSprout, Promethean, Scholastic, and Schoology (for the complete list of inBloom partners, see here).

But as inBloom moves forward, many questions remain, and not simply as Information Week recently and patronizingly suggested, because the project is "understandably obscure to the average PTA mom." Indeed, Bill Fitzgerald, co-founder of the open source education company FunnyMonkey has posted a number of questions on his blog after diving into the technical specifications: What is a "unique state identifier"? Which states use Social Security Numbers for student records? Will inBloom data be used to screen students' immigration status? Why is corporate punishment not tracked? What student characteristics really matter, and what's the educational goal (versus the administrative goal, perhaps) of tracking some of this data?

So in an attempt to get some clarity over what inBloom will gather, how long it will store it, and what recourse parents have who want to opt out, I sent the following questions to the company. Comments from inBloom's spokesperson are below:

1) Is this one database? Or does each state, district, school have a separate database? Will inBloom ever allow researchers

to access datasets across unrelated states, districts, or schools? If so, how will these proposals be vetted, and will students and parents within affected schools be notified/given a choice to participate?

inBloom is not creating a national database. It is providing a secure data service to help school districts manage the information needed for learning, and to support local educational goals. Only school districts decide who has access to that information and for what purpose. Student data will not be combined across states; each participating state and district will have its own protected space in the inBloom service, and they will continue to manage and control access to their student data based on local policies. There is no public or third-party access to data unless it is authorized by a school district or state educational agency to support a local priority. inBloom does not offer any research or aggregated reporting beyond what school districts or state educational agencies implement.

2) What is the delay on open sourcing the infrastructure?

inBloom is committed to making its technology open, and code for a number of applications is already available to developers. inBloom is planning to deliver full source code in the third quarter of 2013. There are two areas of work that are taking longer than we expected. The first is the restructuring of our internal development teams and processes to support and accept code contribution from the community. We want to get there as quickly as possible, and we are adding resources to the team to be able to move faster. The second is developing the business relationships and ensuring interoperability of any resulting new instances of services that result from our code. Our core mission is about interoperability, so while code will be available, we need business structures with potential partners to ensure we can deliver on that goal. As an aside, it's important to note that the open sourcing of code does not in any way impact the security of student data stored in the inBloom service. The management of the open source code-base and the operation of the production service are completely separate.

3) inBloom states that it needs to agree to store SSNs. What circumstances would lead inBloom to refuse to store SSN's if a school, district, or state wanted to use them as identifiers?

inBloom discourages using social security numbers as student IDs. It's best practice to use unique student IDs that are not social security numbers. Not all states and districts have made this transition yet, so we would not refuse such a request (but we would want to be aware that this info is being stored).

4) How long will students' data be stored? How long will educators' data be stored?

The inBloom service is able to store multiple years of data, so states and districts can choose what data they want to store and for how long. Some will choose to store historical achievement and enrollment information to power reporting applications that help make sense of a student's entire academic career.

5) What is the business model for inBloom?

inBloom is an independent, nonprofit organization that is committed to keeping its operating costs and service fees low to support sustainable, cost-effective personalized learning. Thanks to initial funding from the Gates Foundation and Carnegie Corporation, we are able to offer our 9 pilot states and districts the secure data service and Learning Registry Index for free until 2015. Later in 2013 we will begin working with additional state and district customers, who will pay a nominal per-student license for our services. inBloom has done significant cost benefit analysis, and we project that states and districts who invest in three or more personalized learning tools per year will typically save $5–10 per student on application integration costs, easily recouping inBloom's license fees. We are also exploring approaches to recover costs from providers who benefit from using our service to serve their customers.

6) Much of the focus has been on standardizing the data – are you standardizing data-related policies too? Does inBloom plan to help states/districts negotiate the permissions that companies might want granted in order to access to data (that is, those who want to collect or use or store student data)?

inBloom is providing states and districts with tools to make data management easier, but the districts retain ownership and control of their data and their data policies. Our security model was designed around the core belief that school districts have the responsibility and authority to manage student records and determine legitimate educational need through their own policies and processes.

7) Can parents opt out? Or, has inBloom considered an opt-in model? If not, why not?

Under the law and as reaffirmed in our policies, only school districts can determine who has access to student data and for what

purposes. inBloom is not authorized to alter or remove student records from its data store; those records are owned and controlled solely by the school districts. Parents should contact their child's school district to inquire about their policies.

8) What data is being collected by inBloom that is different than states are currently collecting? For new data fields, how has inBloom decided which student characteristics to track?

While many states tend to collect year-end data for policy and research purposes, districts store a variety of classroom-level learning data created by instructional tool such as local quiz and assessment applications, online games for learning, student portfolios, and teacher daily grade books. States and districts will store the same data with inBloom that they were previously collecting and storing in other places. The inBloom data model is based on CEDS, which means it's capable of storing a wide variety of information, but school districts don't have to populate all the fields of the data store – they will store only the information that is relevant for their learning or administrative purposes, and districts will control who sees what information and for what purposes.

I'll follow up in a separate post with some thoughts on these responses and further questions they prompt me to ask — and not just ask inBloom, I should add, but ask *all* states and districts and schools about their data tracking plans (and the transparency surrounding them).

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Author

Audrey Watters is an education writer, a recovering academic, a serial dropout, a rabble-rouser, and some days, ed-tech's Kassandra.

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- [Beneath the Cobblestones... A Domain of One's Own](#), April 25, 2014
- [Student Data is the New Oil: MOOCs, Metaphor, and Money](#), October 17, 2013
- [A Future With Only 10 Universities](#), October 15, 2013
- [The Myth and Millennialism of "Disruptive Innovation"](#), May 24, 2013
- [Click Here to Save Education: Evgeny Morozov and Ed-Tech Solutionism](#), March 26, 2013
- [Hacking at Education: TED, Technology Entrepreneurship, Uncollege, and the Hole in the Wall](#), March 3, 2013
- [The Real Reason I Dropped Out of a PhD Program](#), August 29, 2012
- ["The Audrey Test": Or, What Should Every Techie Know About Education?](#), March 17, 2012
- [Apple and the Digital Textbook Counter-Revolution](#), January 19, 2012
- [Codecademy and the Future of (Not) Learning to Code](#), October 28, 2011
- [The Wrath Against Khan: Why Some Educators Are Questioning Khan Academy](#), July 19, 2011

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