



Report on the eQuality Youth  
Summit On EdTech

October 2022

The eQuality Project - Report on the eQuality Youth Summit On EdTech

This report can be downloaded from:

<https://www.equalityproject.ca/equality-project-youth-summit/>

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On October 1, 2022, a diverse group of 30 young people between the ages of 15 and 18 met with five policymakers for a one-day summit to talk about their experiences with education technologies. The summit was designed to give the young people an opportunity to share their experiences and relay their concerns and needs directly to people in charge of making policies that affect them.

This report summarizes the conversation and sets out the following key calls for action:

## **BE TRANSPARENT.**

Schools spend lots of time telling students how to dress. Put the same effort into telling us exactly what happens to our information when we use edtech platforms and apps.

## **GIVE STUDENTS A CHOICE.**

We should be able to decide for ourselves if, when and how we're going to use edtech, especially when it collects our personal information.

## **PRIORITIZE IN-PERSON LEARNING.**

Prioritize in-person classroom learning because it's the best environment for us to learn, connect with our peers and develop strong and helpful relationships with our teachers.

## **DON'T ENFORCE CAMERAS & NOTIFICATIONS.**

Don't force us to use cameras or turn on notifications. Maintain a healthy boundary between school and our private lives and only send us notifications during the school day.

## **DON'T SURVEIL STUDENTS.**

Don't put us under surveillance when we're doing our school work. Our conversations with each other are private and should be respected as such.

## **GIVE STUDENTS A SAY.**

Give us a say in the technologies and policies that affect us. We need more processes like this Summit to tell designers, policymakers and educators exactly what's happening on the ground and what our concerns and needs are.

# INTRODUCTION

On October 1, 2022, a diverse group of 30 young people between the ages of 15 and 18 met with five policymakers for a one-day summit to talk about their experiences with education technologies. The summit was designed to give the young people an opportunity to share their experiences and relay their concerns and needs directly to people in charge of making policies that affect them.

## WHO

The Youth Participants were recruited from school and community groups that are focused on student action, such as school-based human rights groups, cultural clubs and Gay Straight Alliances. The 30 participants were between 15 and 18 years of age and came from a wide variety of communities and orientations, ensuring the dialogue included a diversity of voices and perspectives. Although most participants lived in Ottawa, others lived in Toronto and travelled to Ottawa for the Summit.

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**"[T]he ability to adapt to these platforms relies on your teachers to teach them to you."**

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The Policymakers included Deputy Privacy Commissioner of Canada Brent Homan, Privacy Commissioner of Ontario Patricia Kosseim, Assistant Privacy Commissioner of Ontario Eric Ward, Interim Director of Curriculum, Assessment and Student Success Policy Branch in the Ontario Ministry of Education Mishaal Surti, and Principal (retired) in the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board Andrew Postma.

## WHAT

The Youth Summit was designed as a democratic initiative to provide young citizens with an opportunity to have a voice in policies that affect them. Our one-day dialogue was "deliberative": rather than coming together to share their top-of-mind opinions, each participant spent approximately ten hours reviewing background material to gather their thoughts so they

could focus on the things that mattered most to them during the Summit.

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**"[I]n addition to learning schoolwork, we have to also learn technology."**

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The assumption behind this kind of dialogue is that participants are experts in their own lives and have important insights into how edtech impacts their educational experience. Because of this, the background material didn't seek to educate participants about the issues. Instead it provided them with an opportunity to explore the issues and reflect on their own experiences and concerns.

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**"The dreaded Chromebook."**

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To provide both a common language and a touchstone for the conversation, each participant watched a film called #tresdancing, co-developed and co-funded by eQuality. The film tells the near-future story of a young girl who wears a pair of smart glasses to help her increase her math grades. As she works to get more and more "points" from the math app, she finds herself facing difficult choices because of the surveillance enabled by the glasses.

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**"If you are forced to turn on camera and mic, you did not want to show your whole class your environment and the choice to show those personal pieces is taken from you."**

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Participants also reviewed videos demonstrating how algorithmic profiling works to help them link the apps they use in school to possible outcomes they may have experienced. They also reviewed information about

child rights and their standing as rights holders under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

To help them prepare, participants had access to a digital notebook where they could privately make notes, respond to prompting questions and organize their thoughts before they took part in the discussion at the Summit.

## WHERE

The Summit took place at the University of Ottawa campus which is located on the unceded territory of the Anishinàbe Algonquin people. Ottawa is located at the nexus of three rivers and has been a traditional gathering place for talk and community building for millennia, so we are particularly grateful to have been able to meet on this land. We pay respect to the Algonquin people, who are its traditional guardians, for this privilege.

## WHEN

The Summit took place on October 1, 2022. It was a full-day event, with two rounds of dialogue, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Each round was followed by a plenary discussion so participants could share ideas across tables.

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"[There's] an unwritten agreement [that] what's in the group chat, stays in the group chat."

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During the lunch break, participants visited the Ottawa Art Gallery where they saw an exhibit of work created by youth exploring their experiences of networked privacy and equality. For more information on the exhibit, visit the Art Exchange on The eQuality Project website.

## HOW

The dialogue itself was designed to reflect the fact that young people are experts in their own lives and have nuanced and rich understandings of how ed tech affects them and their education.

The participants were divided into four groups. Each group sat around a table together with a policymaker, a facilitator and a note-taker.

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"One teacher told us to open our camera, and it is so stressful because your room has to look good, and there are a lot of things to do... You don't just sit and study, it adds up stress."

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The policymakers' role was to listen. To help them to focus on this role, they were asked to give a brief summary of what they heard to start off the plenary session held at the end of each round of dialogue. Policymakers also sat at a different table in each of the two sessions, so they could hear a multiplicity of views and experiences.

The facilitators and note-takers were all young adults who had completed facilitation training with the Work Centre for Dialogue at Simon Fraser University. This prepared them for their roles at the Summit and helped build capacity for their participation in any future interventions.

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"I don't want to miss anything because notifications are key. Everything is thrown to you 24/7, and you have to juggle."

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A social worker attended the Summit to respond to questions raised by participants and to meet with individual participants if they so wished.

Following the advice of eQuality youth partners and advisors, youth participants were compensated for their time and expertise. They were also provided with a certificate documenting any volunteer hours they spent on the project for the purposes of meeting high school graduation requirements.

The dialogue took place under Chatham House Rules. Accordingly, although notes of the discussion were taken, none of the summary below is attributed to an identifiable individual. This was done to ensure participants were comfortable expressing their views freely.

# THE CONVERSATION

## TELL US WHAT YOU'RE DOING AND GIVE US A CHOICE

One of the strongest messages that came out of the discussion was the fact that so many participants felt that they had no choice about whether or not they used edtech. This was seen as a particularly difficult position to be in because they knew that the technology was collecting information about them as they used it. As discussed below, this surveillance caused them a number of problems and restructured their education in ways that were uncomfortable at best and intrusive at worst. For some, disconnecting was the only way to manage the stress this caused but that was complicated by the fact that their schools insisted they interact with teachers and classmates online.

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**"We don't have the option to opt-out, if you don't opt-in, then you can't go to school."**

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This sense that they had no choice but to connect was compounded by the fact that their schools didn't tell them if and how their information is being used by the schools, the Board or the corporations who design or support the apps they use. One participant argued that since schools spent an inordinate amount of time telling students how to dress, they should spend a commensurate amount of time telling them how edtech uses their data so young people can make informed decisions about whether or not they want to use it.



## BEING TOGETHER IN A CLASSROOM WITH OTHER PEOPLE MATTERS

During the course of the conversation, participants mentioned the convenience of using edtech tools, including the fact they didn't have to carry heavy books or binders, apps made it easy to highlight information, and having their assignments on a school Intranet made it easy to access and organize their work. However, they agreed that these tools were only one part of an education that was rooted in inter-personal interactions in a classroom with teachers and other students.

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**"High school and university is a whole experience. You meet people, and after class, you grab coffee and talk to your friends, and share experiences that are priceless, and online, you close your laptop and move on to the next task. It is lonely, and it's not worth it."**

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They concluded that part of this reflects the fact that networked tools can't replace in-person activities, like gym and science labs. One participant illustrated this by reflecting on how their learning experience was diminished by having to view a frog dissection on FaceTime rather than actually doing the dissection in class. Others preferred traditional methods like pen-and-paper notetaking for some courses, such as math, which one participant described as a "pencil based" course.





Once again, what mattered to them most was that they would have a choice so they could pick the tools that worked best for them.

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**“Technology eroded the boundary between work and home life.”**

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They also lamented the way that tech-based learning separated them from their peers. They were particularly concerned about the loss of the social interaction that is just part of being in a classroom, pointing out that edtech detracts from the opportunity for small talk and connection that makes learning fun. Although some used social media platforms, virtual study groups, group chats, and video conferencing to socialize with friends and do schoolwork at a distance, that only worked if their friends used the same platforms. One participant described how they had to personally inform their friends who chose not to use social media of "what they need to know online" to keep them connected with others.

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**"We don't have a choice; it's not consent, it's not even as if I could consent since we started using ed tech when I was in 7th grade."**

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But even with social media and conferencing platforms, edtech couldn't replicate the easy social environment of

the classroom. Much of the conversation about this reflected their experiences with remote learning during the pandemic, which felt like “being stuck in a box”, and they worried about the impact that the separation had on the development of their social skills.

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**“I don't have the choice to not use it, that's what the entire school is using.”**

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Many also found that edtech made it more challenging to create and maintain relationships with their teachers. One participant reported that building a relationship online with a teacher required immense effort. Another participant echoed this concern when they remarked how their current relationship with teachers is not as close as it was before moving online. Even straight forward technologies like email were complicated. Whereas some participants found it easier to communicate with their teachers because email was accessible whenever they needed to reach out, others found email more difficult than talking in class, both because of the delayed response and because it was harder to express themselves by email than in person.

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**“I don't even want to go in my bedroom because there is the dreaded technology that I use every day.”**

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Even when they were using edtech in the classroom, the technology interrupted their substantive learning because they were also required to learn how to use each app. They told stories of how often they had to do this without any guidance from adults; many ended up teaching their younger siblings to help them navigate the same difficulty. One participant reasoned that students didn't have teacher support with technology because the teachers also weren't taught how to use it, suggesting that edtech can create additional burdens on both students and teachers.

### EDTECH CAN BE INTRUSIVE WHEN IT'S USED WITHOUT RESPECT FOR OUR BOUNDARIES

Much of the conversation focused on the discomfort participants felt when they were required to use edtech in ways that blurred the boundaries between school and home. This was felt most strongly during the pandemic, when some teachers made it mandatory for students to turn on their cameras during class. The cameras not only made their private space visible; they also captured other noises and conversations going on in the background. This was experienced as a serious and highly stressful privacy violation, as it opened up their home environment to perusal and judgment by others.

Participants described the same kinds of concerns about edtech notifications. Some participants reported that turning on notifications was mandatory; others said that

even if it wasn't, they felt they had to turn them on or risk missing out on receiving vital information. This created a high level of stress for them and turned school into a 24/7 activity that constantly required attention. Some talked about avoiding their bedroom or their devices because they were reminders of the need to constantly keep school in mind.

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**“Working from home you have that cycle... Homework, eat, sleep, and repeat. You cannot get out of this box to just smell some fresh air, and even socially if you stay 2, 3, 4 weeks at home every day, socially it is hard to talk to people. Interactions at the grocery store are even hard because you do not have any social interaction.”**

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But the most serious invasions occurred when technology enabled schools to monitor what they were doing when they were hanging out, chatting and doing group work. One participant spoke about their school listening in on a student group chat. When the school decided the conversation was inappropriate, teachers talked to several classes to "condemn the contents". This type of surveillance dramatically disrupted how participants could communicate with their peers and was experienced as a significant breach of their privacy.





Listening in was seen to be particularly egregious when schools monitored participants on social media, but any form of monitoring constituted a breach of trust and negatively impacted their relationship with their teachers and their school.

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**“I don’t get to know [my teachers], they don’t get to know me, it doesn’t benefit any of us.”**

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Some participants also worried that school edtech was reinforcing their pre-existing unhealthy relationships with screens. One argued that they and their friends were already “addicted” to their screens and that edtech was only making this worse. They worried that all this screen time left young people with less energy and “no social battery”. This concern caused one participant to turn to their guidance counsellor for help. Another participant responded by consciously disconnecting for a period of time because their "computer has such a bad energy coming from it."

### **DON'T DOWNLOAD THE COST OF EDTECH ONTO STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES**

Our participants also worried that the financial burden of edtech was being inappropriately placed on families. Some participants reported that they had to earn their own money to purchase a laptop or a new cellphone to attend online courses. Others had to pay for expensive



accessories, such as headphones. Access was also a problem; one participant talked about the stress of having to complete assignments and tests when a storm shut down their Internet access.

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**"Social media should be something that shouldn't be moderated and [should be] separate from school." A participant explained how they felt this oversight was inappropriate, stating, "There should be boundaries on what schools can impeach on." A participant remarked that teachers also have concerns for their privacy, which might be why they want to control what happens online, “but it impacts how the students relate to each other.”**

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Even when they were given a device or provided with an opportunity to purchase a device from the school, they found that these devices were configured in ways that made them hard to use. For example, one participant recounted that they were required to watch a YouTube video for a class but they couldn’t because the school-provided device wouldn’t let them access the site. Others talked about how the school Chromebooks were set up so they couldn’t access their personal email or conferencing platforms like Zoom. Another worried that their school could be using the device to monitor them both in school and at home.

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**“My sister was in a group chat with classmates, and students were making jokes about teachers, and teachers demanded that the group chat end, and it disrupted how students communicate with each other.”**

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Given all their concerns, they concluded that schools – and indeed edtech designers – should consult with young people to see what works for them.

# CALLS FOR ACTION

## eQuality Youth Summit on Educational Technologies Calls for Action

### BE TRANSPARENT.

Schools spend lots of time telling students how to dress. Put the same effort into telling us exactly what happens to our information when we use edtech platforms and apps.

### GIVE STUDENTS A CHOICE.

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Give us a say in the technologies and policies that affect us. We need more processes like this Summit to tell designers, policymakers and educators exactly what's happening on the ground and what our concerns and needs are.

# WANT TO PUT ON YOUR OWN EDTECH SUMMIT?

The Summit invitation, background material (including all videos) and report can be found on the eQuality Project website at:

<https://www.equalityproject.ca/equality-project-youth-summit/>

The materials are free to use should you want to hold you own youth summit.

#tresdancing is part of the Screening Surveillance film series. To see the full series, visit the Screening Surveillance website at:

<https://www.screeningsurveillance.com/>

# WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO

The Algonquin people for their hospitality enabling us to hold the Summit on their territory.

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To the policymakers who attended the event, including Deputy Privacy Commissioner of Canada Brent Homan, Privacy Commissioner of Ontario Patricia Kosseim, Assistant Privacy Commissioner of Ontario Eric Ward, Interim Director of Curriculum, Assessment and Student Success Policy Branch in the Ontario Ministry of Education Michael Surti, and Principal (retired) in the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board Andrew Postma. Your willingness to listen carefully and engage respectfully with young people provides a solid foundation for democratic action in the future.

Our amazing team of youth facilitators and notetakers, including Chauntae DeGannes, Grace Foran, Jaena Kim, Julie Murray, Nicole Murray, Helen Bailey-Postma, Tara Small, and, Andy Villanueva. Your commitment, enthusiasm and talent made preparing for this event a joy.

And mostly, to our youth participants. Without your willingness to share your time, insights and experiences so articulately, none of this would have been possible.

# ABOUT THE eQUALITY PROJECT

The eQuality Project is a 10-year partnership of academic researchers, educators, policymakers, civil society groups, youth organizations and youth funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

eQ is interested in exploring young people's experiences of privacy and equality in networked spaces. For more information on the project, visit our website at:

<https://www.equalityproject.ca/>

# NOTES

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