



Are **FREE** Apps Putting Your School and Your Students at Risk?

by Art Willer, M.Ed.

For the classroom teacher, the word FREE is a breath of fresh air, especially when it comes to stretching chronically inadequate budgets for learning resources. FREE means one less thing you have to convince the principal or the school budget committee to buy. What a relief!

Unfortunately, there are several problems with FREE, especially when it comes to apps we use in the classroom.

The first problem is that there are much higher quality programs on the market, that ask for a price. Let's face it. If that app wasn't free, we wouldn't choose it for our students, would we?

Suppose a teacher has \$1,200 to spend on online apps for the year. Subscribing for three quality apps might cost \$1,800. So, it sounds like a pretty smart decision to compromise on one of the apps, saving \$600 and being able to buy the two other apps the students really need.

This rationalization crumbles when we consider that the public invests between 14 and 17 thousand dollars per year per child to educate our children. When that \$600 savings, which translates to about \$2 a child, is compared to an investment of over 14 thousand dollars per child, it's like putting bicycle wheels on a BMW.

It is fair to say that free apps did not create this bicycle-wheel problem – the lack of a reasonable budget did. However, just because there is an easy solution at hand, does not mean we should take it. The real solution is to argue for a better budget, and not let the lack of it lead to even more problems than we started with.

Even if we cave on the bicycle-wheel argument, there is a second problem. The problem is that free apps are free for a specific reason.

Free applications are part of a new industry that makes billions of dollars annually, not just by showing advertisements to online users, but by collecting, sharing and analyzing every piece of personal information about every user including sex, age, political leaning, religion, interests, and whatever else pushes buttons when it comes to persuading people in a desired direction. Marketers call this behavioral modeling. Others just call it an invasion of privacy.

This new industry practice, called *target marketing*, establishes corridors within thousands of advertising apps. It is through these corridors that advertisements flow *to* the user's screen. It is also through these corridors that data flows *back* to the target marketers (even when the ads are turned off). The app itself sends some information back to the target marketers, but even more data is gathered by mining information left on the user's computer by other advertising applications.

Enter the *Children's Online Privacy Protection Act* (the "COPPA"), enacted in 2000 by the Congress of the United States of America. The express purpose of the COPPA is to enshrine the privacy and security of children when it comes to online exposure.

In particular, the COPPA obligates anybody in the professions that serve children, to ensure children are not exposed to online applications that violate the COPPA.

For some reason, the COPPA extends only to children up to the age of 13, but I believe that is only to define its jurisdiction, not to suggest we can forget about children age 14 and over. At Bytes of Learning, we think the COPPA is a wonderful policy to apply for all users regardless of age, and we do.

Our product *UltraKey Online* easily complies with the COPPA because we serve nobody other than our customers. We charge our customers an honest and fair price for our services. In return for that price, we become obligated to meet their needs and to protect their interests, not just our own.

The free app promises nothing because that is what we pay for it. To confirm this, take a close look at the terms of service of any free app you are using in your classroom. You will find it a startling read.

Still thinking, what harm could it really do for me to use just a few free apps in my classroom?

Consider this. Our company recently gained the approval of a Chicago school to purchase *UltraKey Online*, which meant we had to apply to become a supplier for Chicago schools. To qualify, we had to certify we had 2 million dollars in liability coverage for breach of security, and 250 thousand dollars in liability coverage for failure to perform. We also had to accept several District practice and ethics policies. All this was to ensure Bytes of Learning would not fail the Chicago Public Schools or its teachers and students.

Free apps provide our school, our students and us no protection whatsoever. Why should they? We did not pay them any money, right?

FREE is not a price we professionals are permitted to pay for compromising the education, privacy or security of the children we teach. Whether we are a superintendent, principal, or classroom teacher, FREE is a professional line we must not cross.

About the author: Art Willer is the founding president of Bytes of Learning Incorporated, which researches, develops and publishes professional online instruction for education. Art is a former classroom teacher who completed graduate studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (U Toronto) with focus on curriculum and language development. Art has written many provocative articles for the education community.

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