

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer and Business Education

Student Surveys: *Ask Yourself Some Questions*

It's not unusual for school administrators to be asked permission to distribute surveys to their students. Federal law enforcement officials say that among the factors to weigh when you're deciding whether to use class time to collect information from students is knowing how the information will be used.

Information about students is a valuable asset. It can help educational institutions reach students who might be interested in their programs, and it can be used by commercial businesses to target an audience who might like their products and services.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) recently reached settlements with two companies that distribute surveys to students through their schools. According to the FTC, the companies claimed that they would use the student information for educational purposes only, such as college recruitment. The FTC contends that the companies also used the information for commercial marketing purposes. The companies have agreed to make clear disclosures if they plan to use student information for noneducational marketing purposes.

If an organization asks you to distribute a survey to your students, the FTC recommends that you check to see if the survey form includes a privacy statement. If there is no privacy statement, you may want to think twice about distributing the survey. In any case, it is wise to know:

- who is collecting the information;
- how the information will be used;
- with whom the information will be shared; and
- whether students will have a choice about the use of their information.

The Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) is a federal law that affords certain rights to parents of minor students with regard to surveys that ask questions of a personal nature, as well as to surveys designed to collect personal information from students for marketing purposes. Briefly, with regard to marketing surveys, PPRA generally requires schools to develop policies, notify parents about these surveys and permit them to opt their children out of participation in those surveys. Surveys that are exclusively used for certain educational purposes are exempted from these requirements. For more information about the PPRA, visit the Department of Education's website at www.ed.gov/offices/OM/fpco.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit www.ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

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