Colorado Charter Schools Annual Conference

February 25-27, 2026
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If you want to go far, go together."
— African proverb

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Beyond the Breach: Strengthening Cybersecurity in Charter Schools

Travis Bittecuffer, Director of IT Client Services
Vertex Education

Evergreen D
February 26, 2026 | 11:00 AM – 12:00 PM
Technology & AI

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Beyond the Breach

Strengthening Cybersecurity in Charter Schools

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Vertex Education

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Topics We'll Cover Today

What are Some Common Cybersecurity Threats?

What Can I Do To Protect My School?

What Tools and Resources are available?

PowerSchool Data Breach

What Is the PowerSchool Breach?

What Happened:

- On December 28, 2024, PowerSchool discovered a cybersecurity breach where personal information was taken from its Student Information System (SIS) via its PowerSource customer support portal.

How Did It Happen?

- Access was gained using a compromised employee password, and the breach went undetected for 106 days.
- At the time, the compromised account used to access PowerSource did not require Multifactor Authentication.

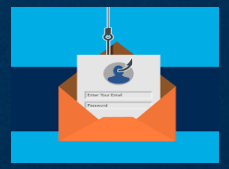
What Was the Impact?

- The breach potentially impacted 60 million students and 10 million educators globally.
- It gave unauthorized access to PowerSource, potentially exposing sensitive information such as names, dates of birth, medical details, Social Security numbers, and other personal data.

Was the Hacker found?

- A 19-year-old college student pleaded guilty to the cyber attack, and to extorting the company for $2.85M in Bitcoin. He was sentenced to 4 years in prison and a $25K fine.
- The arrest of an alleged threat actor is a rare move in terms of identifying and holding perpetrators accountable for ransomware attacks.

What are Common Cybersecurity Threats?



Email Phishing

- Email phishing is a scam where attackers send fake emails that look real – often pretending to be a trusted person or company to trick you into clicking a link, opening an attachment, or giving away sensitive information like passwords or financial details.

Password Compromise

- Password compromise happens when someone gains unauthorized access to your password – often through phishing, data breaches, or weak password practices – allowing them to access your accounts or systems.

Breach of Sensitive Data

- A breach of sensitive data happens when protected or confidential information – like Social Security numbers, health records, or financial data – is accessed, shared, or stolen without permission.

Ransomware

- Ransomware is a type of malicious software that locks or encrypts your files so you can't access them, unless you ransom to the attacker.

How Can I Protect My School?

Create a Cybersecurity Culture

- Train Staff
- Create an Incident Response Plan

Use Technology Best Practices

- Implement Multifactor Authentication
- Update Software and Systems
- Don’t Share Passwords, Require Complex Passwords

Ensure Network Security

- Segment School Data from Public Networks
- Secure Wireless and Wired Networks

Cybersecurity Culture

Prioritize Cybersecurity

Train Educators and Staff

- Teachers and Staff are your first line of defense
- Lead By Example: School leaders must prioritize cybersecurity, follow policies and procedures, participate in training, and demonstrate that cybersecurity is a core value of the school
- Ensure your team understands how to spot a Phishing attempt and react appropriately
- IT Support needs to be a safe place where staff can turn to report potential security issues
- Train your team on how to safeguard school devices and data
- Emphasize personal responsibility, help staff understand how their actions impact the school

Incident Response and Reporting

- Develop policies and procedures around reporting potential cybersecurity threats
- Create an Incident Response Team, and a clear Incident Response Plan
- Communicate Cybersecurity Policies regularly
- Practice implementing the Incident Response Plan

Technology Best Practices

Effort Goes a Long Way

Implement Multifactor Authentication

Access to all school systems and data should require authenticating via at least two methods.

- Login and Password provided by the school or school system
- Verification via text/call to a known number to which only you have access
- Verification through an Email received at an address to which only you have access
- Verification through an MFA application such as Microsoft Authenticator, Google Authenticator, Duo Mobile, etc.

Software and Systems Updates

Ensure all School Systems and Software are up to date.

- Malicious actors use “bugs” or “holes” in software and systems to gain unauthorized access
- “Patching” and Keeping software and systems up to date lessens the risk of unauthorized access

Enforce Password Rules

Passwords used to access school systems and data should require the use strong, secure passwords that are difficult to guess or crack.

- Enforce the use of special characters (e.g., ! @ # $ %) Capital and Lower case, and a minimum length

School Network Security

Secure Your Network

Secure Wireless Network

Do you have to enter a password to access the wireless network?

Has the password been the same for a long time, or is it written or displayed openly?

Do guests to your school have a separate wireless network to connect to?

Is the guest network password updated routinely?

Segment School and Open Networks

Can you access school data from the same wireless network as students can use for non-school devices?

Are school systems accessible from the same network as student web browsing?

Questions to Ask Yourself

- Is my school in control of its sensitive data or do I rely upon a third party to keep my school's data secure?
- Are my school's systems and software up to date? Who is in control of this?
- Are my school data network and our public network segmented?
- Is my school doing its due diligence in keeping student and staff sensitive data secure?
- Does my staff know what to do in the event of a data breach or system compromise?
- Does my school have required training for staff on cybersecurity awareness?

What Online Tools and Resources are Available?

- SANS Institute – The Highest Standard in Cybersecurity Education since 1989
  - https://www.sans.org/security-resources
- Amazon Cybersecurity Awareness Training
  - https://learnsecurity.amazon.com/en/index.html
- Cyber101 Training
  - https://www.cyber101.com/training
- Astound: Cybersecurity Resources for Kids: Keeping Young Minds Safe Online
  - https://www.astound.com/learn/internet/cybersecurity-resources-kids/#eero
- HPE LIFE Cybersecurity Awareness Training
  - https://www.life-global.org/course/346-introduction-to-cybersecurity-awareness

How can Vertex Education help?

Free Technology Environment Assessment:

Vertex Education provides a FREE Technology Assessment to Charter Schools that measures and reports on the following:

- **Cybersecurity Awareness**
- **Software and Systems**
- **Incident Response and Reporting**
- **Support Services**
- **Policies and Procedures**
- **Risk and Remediation Plan**
- **Network Security**

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