

2019–20 SCHOOL YEAR

# Through the Gaggle Lens The State of Student Safety





# The State of Student Safety

2019–20 SCHOOL YEAR

This annual report highlights key trends in harmful student behavior as revealed through the Gaggle lens. It shows the frequency of these behaviors among students nationwide, so K-12 leaders are aware of these threats and can take steps to address them. This year was a striking contrast to the typical school year, with most schools across the country shutting down in March as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic—and then remaining closed for the rest of the school year. In a special section of this year’s report, we examine the changes in behaviors and trends through the Gaggle lens during this unusual time.

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At Gaggle, our mission is to help ensure the safety and well-being of all students. We use both artificial intelligence and trained safety experts to proactively assist districts in the prevention of bullying, inappropriate behaviors, school violence, and other harmful situations—24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Gaggle has helped hundreds of districts avoid tragedies and save lives, while also protecting their liability.





## Kids In Crisis

Public schools have just completed the most unusual school year in modern history. They closed their campuses during the last quarter and moved to full-time distance learning as a way to help manage the spread of COVID-19. Students were quarantined at home with their families as most businesses closed, with the exception of essential businesses such as grocery stores, medical facilities, and first responders. The disruption this caused in students' lives was profound and resulted in behavior changes that deviated from trends during the nine months prior to the pandemic.

Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among 10- to 19-year-olds, and is a leading cause of concern for teachers and district leaders. Educators often rely on their physical proximity to students to ensure students' well-being. During the COVID-19 pandemic, educators were challenged by the constraints of remote learning and relied on Gaggle to help them identify students who were in immediate danger of harming themselves or others.

Suicide is the **second-leading cause of death** among 10- to 19-year-olds



“We’re able to have a presence in a space that normally we wouldn’t be part of. We’re not in their homes with them, but when students are creating these calls for help, we want to be able to act and provide the necessary support.”

**Dr. Adrian Palazuelos, Superintendent**

Fillmore Unified School District



During the 2019–2020 school year, Gaggle discovered:



references to suicide or self-harm in students' online activity. Of these, **more than 5,600 were serious enough to merit immediate attention by the district.**



references of violence toward others. **More than 1,600 warranted an immediate call to prevent a potential incident.**



instances of nudity or sexual content, with **more than 2,400 requiring immediate action.**

Gaggle’s student safety management solution uses a combination of machine learning algorithms and human safety experts to review students’ online activity. School officials are notified when students show signs of self-harm, depression, thoughts of suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, cyberbullying, unhealthy relationships, violence toward others, and other credible threats.

When **Northern York County School District** (NYCSD) in Pennsylvania implemented the Gaggle student safety platform, administrators knew that if the solution saved just one life, it would be more than worth the investment. In late 2019, Gaggle flagged a student document that was a suicide note written to his family outlining his plan and saying goodbye. Gaggle immediately contacted the school’s administrators. Within half an hour of receiving the alert from Gaggle, school leaders were in the student’s home along with the local police to perform a wellness check. The student received the help he needed to address his struggles, and officials believe they **saved a student’s life that day.**

Although the students at greatest risk are generally in middle and high school, students at the elementary level are also engaging in activities that are dangerous to themselves and others. Teachers do not always see warning signs that can identify at-risk students. Even in the best of times when students are on campus full time, it can be difficult to identify those students who are hurting.

“We have 14,100 students. Inevitably, somebody is going to be struggling with something,” said Michael Kuhrt, superintendent at [Wichita Falls Independent School District](#) in Texas. “We felt pretty safe,” he continued. “Then, when we started using Gaggle to monitor what students were really talking and writing about online, all of a sudden everything became a lot more real.”

This report highlights trends in harmful student behavior as revealed through Gaggle. It shows the frequency of these behaviors across the country so districts can take their own steps to protect their students. This year’s report will address year-over-year trends as well as highlight the pandemic period of March through May.



“We needed to make sure we’re keeping kids safe in this new world that we’ve introduced them to. As a school district, it’s unacceptable for us to put this kind of technology in the students’ hands without some sort of oversight.”

**Melissa Craven**  
**Director of Emergency Management**  
Denver Public Schools



## Methodology

Gaggle’s student safety solution analyzes and reviews the use of online tools within Google’s G Suite, Microsoft Office 365, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, and the Canvas learning management system for more than 4.5 million students across the United States. Machine learning technology watches for specific words and phrases that might indicate potentially harmful behavior. When a match surfaces, the content is evaluated by a trained safety professional to determine whether it is a threat and how much of a threat it poses.

Each incident is sorted by type according to the kind of content it represents. Gaggle safety experts use a threat assessment rubric to determine the level of severity. For the lowest level violation, students receive warnings by email for violating their school’s acceptable use policy. When multiple warnings occur for the same student, administrators may be notified.

The next level is for incidents that give cause for concern but do not indicate an imminent threat to a student’s life. In these instances, administrators are notified by email.

Incidents at the highest level reveal an imminent threat to a student’s life or well-being. These instances result in direct, immediate notifications by phone to the school or district’s specified contact, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

This report is based on data collected from July 2019 through June 2020 by Gaggle safety experts.



Gaggle’s student safety solution integrates with the following online tools, protecting more than 4.5 million students:

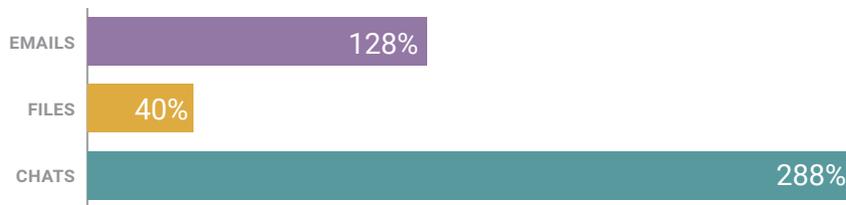




# Key Takeaways

During the 2019–2020 school year, Gaggle analyzed more than 6.25 billion email messages, chats, and files. Reviewed email messages increased by 84%, reviewed files increased 29%, and reviewed chat items more than doubled, growing by 120% for the year.

However, the pandemic played a significant role in the shape of this increase. During the pandemic time frame, reviewed email messages increased by 128%, 40% for files, and 288% for chat messages. Clearly, the volume of reviewed items increased more sharply during the pandemic than the trendline of the previous nine months of the school year.

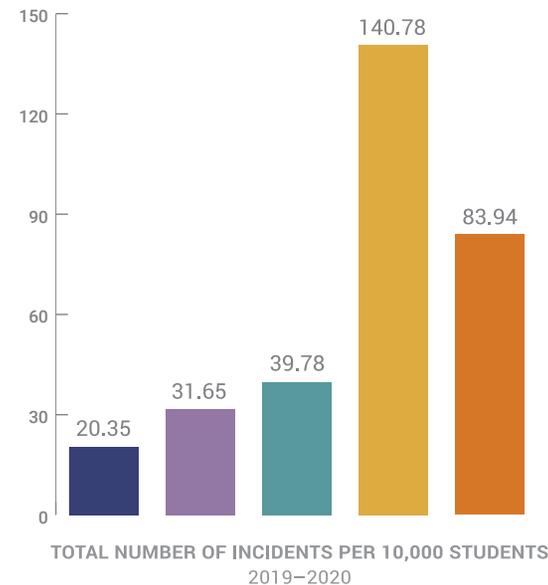


Here is the year-over-year increase by incident category for the full 2019–2020 school year:



Prior to the pandemic, 40% of incidents occurred after hours and 12% occurred overnight. During the pandemic, incidents happening after hours increased by 55%, with 22% occurring overnight.

Even prior to the pandemic, and certainly during the pandemic, it is clear that the majority of incidents were happening outside school hours when educators weren't actively watching what students posted online. This is the 24/7 peace of mind that Gaggle provides for districts. "We've come to a point in our society in which the school cannot be the sole provider and the sole protector of our students," said Eric Eshbach, superintendent at NYCSD. "We truly have to work as a community through this process."



"We've been very pleased with our investment in Gaggle, which is basically like having your own personal '911' system specifically for your district.

**Dr. Melissa Williams-Scott**  
Executive Director of Information Systems

Dickinson Independent School District





## Suicide & Self-Harm

Gaggle's unique blend of machine learning and safety team review looks for signs that students are experiencing emotional distress. Specifically, Gaggle looks for students who might be depressed, have suicidal thoughts, or are engaging in self-harm behavior, such as cutting or burning themselves. Year over year, Gaggle saw a 19% increase in incidents in this category.

Year over year, Gaggle saw a **19% increase in incidents** in this category



Prior to the pandemic, however, suicide and self-harm incidents were increasing at 30%. During the pandemic, we observed two different trends. First, the number of incidents of suicide and self-harm went down. Secondly, students reached out to their teachers more often to ask for help. Here are some examples of things students have written in emails, documents, and chats:

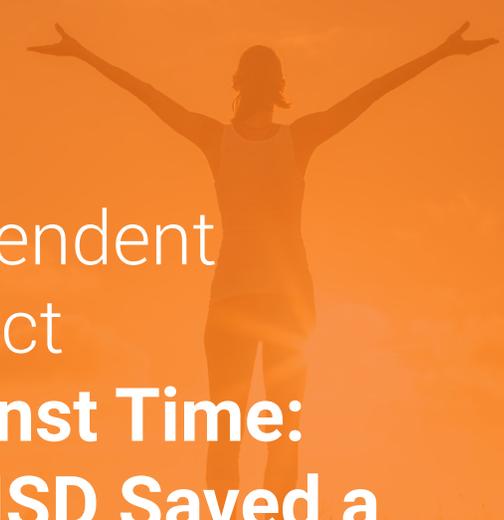
-  *"Im gonna wait so i can make my suicide quick so my sister wont worry. Im just am gonna grab my moms pistol."*
-  *"I want to die. I want to kill myself. School is too stressful and is ruining my life."*
-  *"No one can exactly know how I'm feeling right now. I can't really explain it in words, but I really want to be gone from this earth. I just dont want to exist at all, and my family can never know what I'm going through, they actually make it worse, and sometimes I just want to go back to cutting myself and hopefully overdose on pills one day and just be gone."*

### NUMBER OF ACTIONABLE ITEMS

SCHOOL YEAR	TOTAL ITEMS
2019-2020	63,728

### CASE STUDY

# Keene Independent School District A Race Against Time: How Keene ISD Saved a Life Using Gaggle



After receiving an alert from Gaggle about a student who was believed to be at risk of suicide, the principal, assistant principal, and chief of police all raced to the school to retrieve contact information for the student's parents. In Texas, Education Service Centers (ESCs) enable school districts to operate more efficiently, and one of their main functions is providing information about students. When the district's regional ESC went down for the evening, obtaining the hard copy from the school was the only way to get the information and save the student's life.

"I absolutely believe that without Gaggle, this student would have gone through with the act and taken her own life," said Chris Taylor, principal of Keene High School. "Her mother had no idea how much she was struggling." The student was taken to the hospital to receive the support she needed and is doing much better today.

Read the full story at [gaggle.net/success stories](https://gaggle.net/success-stories)



"I absolutely believe that without Gaggle, this student would have gone through with the act and taken her own life."

**Chris Taylor**  
Principal

Keene High School





# 24/7/365 SAFETY

Creating a safe digital learning space for your students—**all day, every day.**



**1,600+ violent threats resolved**



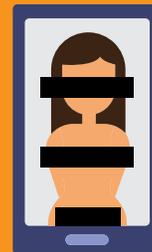
**927 student lives saved**



**79% increase in domestic abuse incidents during the pandemic**



**61% increase in harassment incidents**



**2,400+ sexually explicit images involving minors**



**64,000 references to suicide and self-harm**



# Violence **Toward Others**

When monitoring violence toward others, Gaggle looks for signs that students might be planning an attack or threatening someone with physical harm. Signs of possible violence include mentions of weapons, bomb threats, or other explicit threats. While the year-over-year increase in incidents of violence toward others ran about 12%, there was actually a 43% decrease in this category during the pandemic. Not surprisingly, with students at home away from school campuses, there was less opportunity for students to act out toward others.

Year over year, the increase in incidents of violence toward others ran **about 12%**



Examples of student statements about violence include:

-  *"So I been seeing on Snapchat this post going around about a school shooting tomorrow @9:20 in the all general bathroom"*
-  *"We all finna fight her after school TODAY! But you know I got you bestie"*
-  *"My dad really f'd me up tonight he hit me, choked me, hit me and dragged me by my leg to my room while I was on the ground."*

### NUMBER OF ACTIONABLE ITEMS

SCHOOL YEAR	TOTAL ITEMS
2019-2020	37,996

## CASE STUDY

# Mooreville Graded School District A Digital Sentry That Keeps Students Safe

Located in North Carolina, Mooreville was an early technology adopter, and the district's 1:1 initiative is now 13 years old. As Mooreville's student safety platform, Gaggle has proven its value on numerous occasions during the 10 years of partnership with the district.

For example, when Gaggle caught an email discussing a possible physical altercation between two female students, the school's principal, assistant principal, and counselor were all alerted via email. One of those administrators then talked to the student who sent the email, thus diffusing the situation before it turned into a real problem.

"If you are unaware that this stuff is going on, you really can't do anything about it," said Dr. Scott Smith, assistant superintendent for elementary instruction and technology. "The reality is that this activity is going on in the digital world, whether you're 1:1 or not. With the current state of school violence and safety, we need to have as much information as we can to make sure all of our kids are safe."



"With the current state of school violence and safety, we need to have as much information as we can to make sure all of our kids are safe."

**Dr. Scott Smith**  
Assistant Superintendent  
for Elementary Instruction  
and Technology  
Mooreville Graded  
School District



Read the full story at [gaggle.net/success stories](https://gaggle.net/success-stories)



# Nudity & Sexual Content

The kinds of incidents Gaggle flags in this category spans a wide range of student activity, such as sharing nude photos of oneself, asking for nude photos from another student, sharing other pornographic images, discussing sex acts, threatening sexual assault, or even revealing instances of rape and incest.



**24% increase**  
in year-over-year  
nudity and sexual  
content incidents

Gaggle's reports show that this incident category increased throughout the duration of the school year, including an uptick during the pandemic time frame. In fact, there was a 24% increase in year-over-year nudity and sexual content incidents. In particular, there was a noticeable increase in the number of nude selfies students were sending to each other.

Here are some of examples of student incidents that required intervention:

-  Self-taken image of a female exposing her breasts. Her face is fully visible.
-  A student is reporting that two other students are planning to meet and have sex in the school bathrooms
-  Self-taken video of a male and female engaged in sexual intercourse

## NUMBER OF ACTIONABLE ITEMS

SCHOOL YEAR	TOTAL ITEMS
2019–2020	18,009

## CASE STUDY

# East Irondequoit Central School District Stopping a Child Predator in His Tracks

When this New York district implemented Gaggle, the goal was to keep students safe in the digital world. What the district encountered was a months-long investigation resulting in the arrest and conviction of a child predator. Gaggle intercepted pornographic content sent to an 11-year-old sixth grade student, blocked its delivery, and quarantined the file to keep it out of the district's system.

"The file was sent to our police department for their investigation," said Christine Osadciw, executive director of technology for the district. "That was their proof. If we didn't have that video, I don't know if the predator would have been caught." After four months, a man from Michigan was arrested for the crime. "As a tech director, it's difficult. With all of these different online tools that our students have access to, it gets harder and harder to keep them safe," said Osadciw. "If I didn't have a tool like Gaggle, we wouldn't be able to do this."

Read the full story at [gaggle.net/success stories](https://gaggle.net/success-stories)



"If I didn't have a tool like Gaggle, we wouldn't be able to do this."

**Christine Osadciw**  
Executive Director of  
Technology  
East Irondequoit Central  
School District





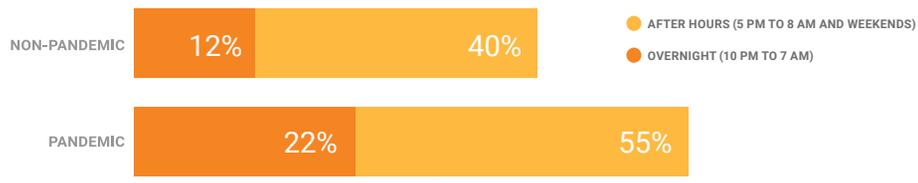
# The Pandemic: Distance Learning and COVID-19

For the first time in living memory, schools closed across the country in March to slow down the spread of COVID-19. As the pandemic progressed, the remainder of the school year continued solely in the virtual environment for most of our nation's students. This sudden shift to remote learning was unevenly deployed across the country—some districts made the transition easily, while others were not able to provide devices and internet access to all of their students.

4 out of 5 of the **highest weeks of reported domestic abuse** occurred during the pandemic

Not surprisingly, the pandemic created a lot of stress for students, teachers, and parents. Even before the pandemic, the increase in inappropriate student behavior was clear, but during the last quarter of the school year, there were changes in both incidents and behaviors.

One notable change during the pandemic was that the hours of student activity shifted. Gaggle considers "after hours" to be from 5:00 PM to 8:00 AM and weekends, while the "overnight" time frame is from 10:00 PM to 7:00 AM. Before the pandemic, 40% of incidents occurred after hours and 12% occurred overnight. During the pandemic, these shifted to 55% of the incidents occurring after hours and 22% overnight. This shift is likely the result of 24/7 access to an electronic device and the natural biorhythms of students learning from home.



## During the pandemic, Gaggle discovered:



### Use of Chat Tools

Gaggle recorded a significant uptick in the use of chat tools both in Google and Microsoft platforms. This **288% increase in chats** was far and away the largest increase across all forms of digital communication. Not surprisingly, the uptick in chat conversations also sparked a dramatic increase in alerts for questionable content and behavior incidents—particularly cyberbullying, self-harm, and abuse.



### Opportunities for Certain Behaviors

During social distancing, students were physically separated from one another and not on school campuses. This meant there were fewer opportunities for students to exhibit violence toward others and fewer opportunities for school administrators to intervene in instances of drug possession or exchanges.

- **Drugs and alcohol incidents saw a 23% decrease**
- **There was a 31% decrease in harassment**
- **Violence toward others decreased 43%**



### in Explicit Content

For nudity and sexual content, there was a **21% increase in explicit content** involving minors that required an immediate response from the district.

## An Increase in Domestic Abuse Alerts

Unfortunately, we saw a disturbing number of references to abuse during the pandemic in students' emails to teachers and counselors, chats with other students, and documents. Students reported abuse by parents, caregivers, and others in the home, including siblings. Living under a state of emergency, job loss, and food insecurity for some may have contributed to increased stress in the home, which might explain some of these incidents.

Four out of five of the highest weeks of reported domestic abuse occurred from mid-March to mid-May. Imminent threats—incidents where a life is in danger or the well-being of an individual is at risk—**increased 79% compared to previous weeks in the year** when students were in school.

Here's what we saw from students during the pandemic:



*"DO NOT RESPOND TO THIS JUST CALL MOM OR THE COPS... DAD HAS PHYSICALLY ABUSED ME TWICE NOW... I NEED MOM TO COME GET ME AND TAKE ME OUT OF HERE, HE SAYS HE IS GOING TO KILL ME. PLEASE HELP ME!!!!!!"*



*"MOMMY DONT TELL MY DAD I SENT THIS HE IS GONNA BREAK MY PHONE AND HIT ME I NEED YOU TO CALL THE COPS AND HAVE THEM AND YOU COME GET ME PLZ IM COMING HOM"*



*"I love my father but all this yelling at us, and hitting us if he can't get his way has to stop. It's made me and my siblings scared to even tell him if we had done something wrong in the fear that he will beat us for it. And my mother doesn't do anything about it. I love my parents but it's mentally and physically exhausting living here."*



"With school buildings closing, we saw a large increase in incidents requiring intervention occurring at home. The threats of violence in the school building and reports of harassment in the hallway were replaced with abuse and struggles with self-harm and suicide at home."

**Heather Durkac**  
**Vice President**  
**of Operations**  
**Gaggle**



## Knowledge Is Power

**Gaggle's data continues to demonstrate to districts its importance as a first alarm to identify students with mental health and inappropriate behavior issues. Also, students use school-issued equipment and online platforms to reveal their troubles to each other and sometimes to teachers. Quite a lot of student online activity, particularly during the pandemic, happens outside of school hours. Gaggle's 24/7 monitoring system provides many district administrators with peace of mind.**

"What Gaggle does makes my job easier," said Dave McQueen, superintendent at [Kelseyville Unified School District](#) in California. "I'm not having to monitor everybody's accounts—Gaggle is taking care of that and I just receive alerts when something requires my attention."

A Gaggle partner for several years, McQueen is a true believer in the solution. "Gaggle is worth having because it's been so effective at helping students," he continued. "We've been able to help multiple students, intervening in situations like suicides and fights—it's really been beneficial. Even if it had only helped one student, it would still be worth it."

The most important metric tracked by Gaggle is student lives saved each year. While the number of lives Gaggle saved year over year increased 28%, the pre-pandemic increase was 11%, compared to 32% during the pandemic.



"What Gaggle does makes my job easier."

**Dave McQueen**  
**Superintendent**

Kelseyville Unified  
School District



**During the 2019–2020 school year, Gaggle was instrumental in saving the lives of 927 students.** We can see from the comparison between the months before the pandemic and the pandemic time frame that Gaggle’s student safety platform is as important to saving lives when students are learning remotely as it is when students are on campus.

“With school now taking place in our students’ living rooms and bedrooms, safety is more important than ever,” said Jeff Patterson, Gaggle’s founder and CEO. “Many educators are concerned that without in-person school, they may not be able to identify students in abusive situations or those suffering from mental illness. We hope Gaggle can be part of your district’s plan to help students who are in crisis.”



“With school now taking place in our students’ living rooms and bedrooms, safety is more important than ever.”

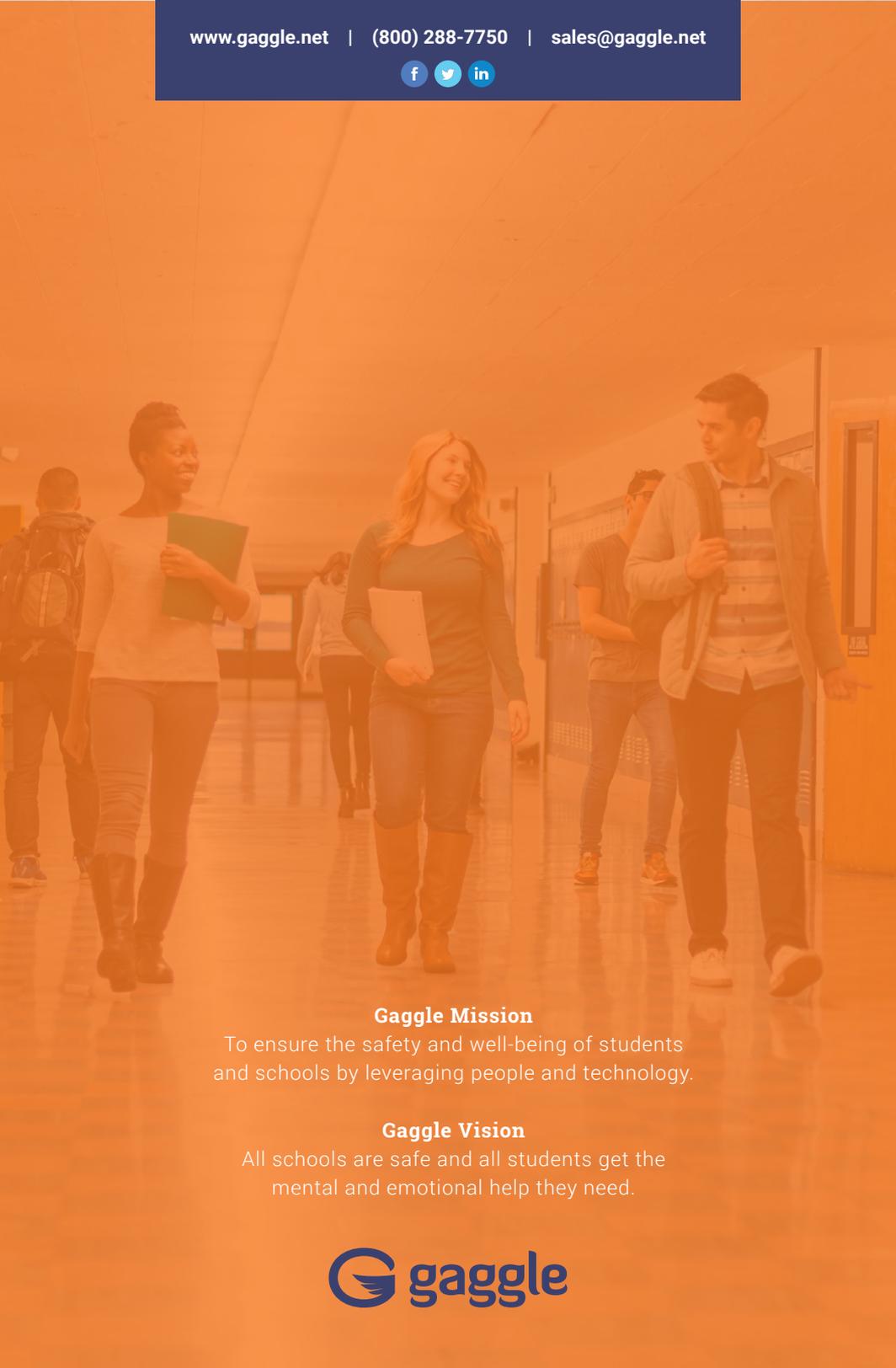
**Jeff Patterson**  
Founder and CEO

Gaggle



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### **Gaggle Mission**

To ensure the safety and well-being of students and schools by leveraging people and technology.

### **Gaggle Vision**

All schools are safe and all students get the mental and emotional help they need.

