

Michelle Krieger: Why Every School District Needs to Prepare for Data Protection

The IT Director's Playbook

Guest: Michelle Krieger, Data Protection Officer, Lake Shore Central School District

Runtime: Approximately 49 minutes

Editorial note: This transcript has been lightly edited for readability. Repeated words, filler, false starts, caption artifacts and nonverbal sounds have been removed. Proper names and technical terms have been corrected where they were clear from context. The source transcript did not identify the individual interviewers, so their remarks are consolidated under

****Host**.**

Michelle Krieger, you have been a special education teacher, an IT director and the first data protection officer in New York. You just gave the keynote at the 2026 Summer Institute, and you did a great job. Thank you so much for sitting down with us today.

Our listeners are primarily K-12 technology directors in the Southeast, and most of them probably do not know you personally. Tell us a little about your story and who you are.

From Special Education to Technology Leadership | 01:01

****Michelle Krieger:**** My name is Michelle Krieger, and I am currently the Data Protection Officer for Lake Shore Central School District in Western New York. That is the Buffalo side of the state, not the city side.

My career did not start in IT. It started as a special education teacher. I was a consultant teacher who went into classrooms and helped teachers differentiate instruction and testing for special education students.

My career follows the evolution of edtech pretty well. Around 2014, when everyone was looking forward to putting devices into students' hands and moving toward one-to-one initiatives, I jumped in feet first.

I was excited about getting that technology into the hands of my special education students. Those students do not always read or write well. Suddenly, they had a device where they could press a button and have the text read to them. Students who had great ideas but struggled to put them on paper could use speech-to-text. That was great.

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My superintendent noticed and said, "We put one-to-one devices into all the students' hands, and I am realizing that not all the teachers love that idea. You have been doing a good job with it. Why don't we move you into helping teachers implement technology in the curriculum?"

It was not technology for technology's sake. It was technology for a purpose.

I became the educational innovator, which was a fun title. I was basically a technology integration specialist. It was not a huge jump from what I had been doing. I had been going into classrooms to help special education students and teachers. Now I was shifting from special education to technology.

Small Districts, Many Hats and the DPO Role | 03:12

****Michelle Krieger:**** In small districts, people wear many hats. My superintendent was also the technology director. As one-to-one technology grew, she realized she might not have all the tools or time to continue in that position.

I got tapped on the shoulder again. They asked if I could become the technology director and take some of those duties away from the superintendent. I gladly did that.

At the time, I was wearing many hats. I was the webmaster. I worked in public relations. I also ran community education for my district and a neighboring district. I had a lot going on.

In 2019, New York State got a new Chief Privacy Officer, Louise DeCandia. She essentially said, "In 2014, we passed Education Law 2-d, which focuses on the privacy of student data and teacher and principal APPR data. No one is really paying attention to it, and I would like you to start."

The law talks about protecting data, working with vendors and requiring every district in New York State to identify a Data Protection Officer.

I was the technology director in Holland, and I still had all those other roles. My superintendent told me, "This is going to be a very important job. I want you to learn as much as you can about it."

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She took the other responsibilities off my plate. No more community education. No more webmaster duties. She said, "Go figure this out."

An Unfunded Mandate and a Built-In Conflict | 05:04

****Michelle Krieger:**** Education Law 2-d was an unfunded mandate. Schools did not receive money to bring in professionals to take on the duties of a Data Protection Officer. In many cases, the job was handed to the technology director.

If you compare the job description of a technology director with the job description of a DPO, they do not have a lot in common. It is also counterintuitive. When the technology director is also the DPO, they become the checks and balances for themselves.

But it was an unfunded mandate, and schools had to decide who would serve as the DPO and submit that name to the state by January 2020. The law had basically been ignored for six years. I do not know whether I should say that, but it is the truth.

In 2019, I began talking with Louise DeCandia and asking what this role should look like inside a school district. In New York, we have Regional Information Centers with knowledgeable staff and cybersecurity experts. I went to them and asked, "How do we do this in a school district?"

As I gained information, I turned around and shared it with friends who were in the same position. I would say, "Did you know you have to do this as a DPO?" They would say, "No, I did not. Let's go do that now."

That eventually became the Western New York DPO Cooperative, which I still run today. We hold monthly Google Meet sessions for anyone who wants to join, and we talk about the work. We discuss how the role should evolve, what AI means for schools and how to address the cybersecurity threat landscape.

I have now been the DPO at Lake Shore Central School District for three years, and I absolutely love it.

Sponsor Break: ALERT | 07:26

****Narrator:**** A 911 call comes in from your school. The dispatcher knows the address. The first responder still has to find the room.

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Is the DPO Model Coming to Southern States? | 08:33

****Host:**** I am the only person in this room who has not been a technology director, so this is new to me. The idea of data protection and a Data Protection Officer may also be foreign to technology directors in the Southern states.

Do you know of other states implementing DPO roles, or is this just New York?

****Michelle Krieger:**** I have visited many states, and several are at the beginning stages of where New York is now. Tennessee, where we are today, is on the precipice of getting something similar to Education Law 2-d.

It is coming, and I think that is a good thing. I never want to scare anyone, but laws and regulations can provide the framework districts need to understand how to do this work correctly.

****Host:**** What about Alabama and Mississippi? How far away are those states from following New York's lead?

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****Michelle Krieger:**** We do not know. If I had a crystal ball, I would say it is close. Tennessee has a lot of legislation under discussion right now. I think this could be on the horizon within a year or two.

What Data Protection Means in a School District | 10:09

****Host:**** Let me step back. What do you mean by data protection?

****Michelle Krieger:**** Under Education Law 2-d, student data must be protected. It should not be used for marketing. It should not be used to feed a large language model. It should not be used for anything other than an educational purpose.

School districts are the ones putting devices into students' hands, so we have a responsibility to keep students safe on those devices, just as we keep them safe in our buildings. We run fire drills and take other steps to protect students physically. School safety now includes data protection and cybersecurity, too.

****Host:**** Are we talking about FERPA and COPPA, or something more?

****Michelle Krieger:**** It is more, although laws around data protection will overlap with FERPA. My position has evolved over the last three years. A better title for me now might be compliance officer because I also handle things like FERPA complaints.

FERPA is a great law. It was introduced in 1974, I believe. There have been very few amendments. In simple terms, it says you cannot give away or provide access to a child's information without parental permission. Education Law 2-d is, in many ways, the digital version of that.

Training Everyone Who Touches the District Domain | 11:59

****Host:**** What does the job look like over the course of a year? What is putting student data at risk?

****Michelle Krieger:**** The people sitting in front of screens in your organization, which means everyone.

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If you have an email address connected to our domain, you are part of the chain. I do not want you to be the weakest link in that chain, so I do a lot of training.

Every employee receives training. No exceptions.

Our cafeteria staff is provided through a third party. I require that service to show me how its staff members were trained in data privacy. If the training does not meet our requirements, we train them ourselves.

I also do a lot of classroom training. I began my education career in the classroom, not in IT, so I am comfortable talking with students about data privacy and security.

Librarians are often responsible for digital citizenship, and I want to give them credit for taking that on. At Lake Shore, I asked our librarians to build on that work by discussing cybersecurity and data protection.

During my first year, I partnered with the librarians. I spent several days with them and modeled how I wanted us to talk with students about data privacy and security. I continued that work for a year. Once they had developed the lesson and unit, I moved on to other things.

This year, I spoke with our finance academy about students getting their first jobs. An economics teacher also asked me to talk with students about the financial impact of a breach on a school district.

That has been a lot of fun. I love that I still have access to students because my heart is in teaching.

Why Data Protection Is Not Just a Technical Role | 14:51

****Host:**** This does not sound like a purely technical role. Because the title includes the word "data," people may assume it belongs in the technology department. But that might not be the most strategic place for the officer. Someone without a traditional IT background could approach it from a different angle and still provide leadership.

****Michelle Krieger:**** Absolutely. Leadership in a data privacy and security role can come from within the district.

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We would all love to bring a professional cybersecurity expert into a school district, but districts do not have \$250,000 sitting around to pay that person. Remember, this was an unfunded mandate.

My education background has been very helpful in this job. The tendency in IT can be to say no.

"Can we use this software?" No, it is not on the list.

"Can we work with this vendor?" No.

Because of my background in education, I can talk with teachers differently. I can say, "That is a great tool, but we have another vendor whose product does the same thing. That vendor has a strong privacy policy and will sign the Student Data Privacy Consortium agreement or the district's own data privacy agreement."

I decided that we would no longer be the Department of No. We would be the Department of Yes, But.

The "but" means vendors must be vetted. We need to use vendors we know will take care of student data.

AI Use Without Policy or Guardrails | 16:56

****Host:**** We talked off camera about AI and some of your concerns related to student data.

****Michelle Krieger:**** We are in the Wild West of AI.

When I speak at conferences, I ask three questions. First, how many districts allow staff and faculty to use AI? Every hand goes up, and people are proud of themselves. Good for you. I am proud of you, too. You are taking a risk.

The second question does not go as well: Who has an AI policy? Far fewer hands go up.

Maybe your board is not prepared to adopt an AI policy yet. There are still other ways to address AI. You can add expectations to your code of conduct or acceptable-use policies while the district develops a formal policy.

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The third question is: How many of you have a framework for using AI? People ask what I mean by a framework. That is when I get scared.

I worry that people are putting protected information into ChatGPT. What concerns me even more is how many districts use ChatGPT without paying for an enterprise version.

I tell districts that if you are a Microsoft district, use Copilot. If you are a Google district, use Gemini, especially if you have the appropriate Google Workspace for Education license. Use the enterprise tool available inside the environment you already manage.

The safest option might be buying another server and developing your own AI bot, but obviously not every district can do that.

AI Is Already Inside the Applications Schools Use | 19:07

Host: You also mentioned concerns about applications.

Michelle Krieger: This is a conversation our governance team has had. Even if your district has not formally adopted AI, you are still dealing with AI because vendors have incorporated it into so much of their software.

For example, a district may have purchased Seesaw years ago, and now Seesaw has an AI platform. How does that change the situation? Do I need to revisit the data privacy agreement? Does anything else need to be covered? How is the Student Data Privacy Consortium handling it?

These are the kinds of questions we discuss in governance meetings. The situation keeps changing.

When you build an AI framework for students and faculty, you are creating a stoplight. There are places where AI cannot be used, places where it can be used under specific conditions and places where users have the green light.

That clarity helps students and teachers understand where AI is and is not appropriate.

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****Host:**** If a district uses Google, you are saying it should probably use Gemini instead of sending people to ChatGPT. Why?

****Michelle Krieger:**** When you use the enterprise versions of Gemini or Copilot under the right Microsoft or Google license, you have different data protections. When people use open consumer AI tools, whatever they put into a prompt may be used to improve the large language model.

Imagine a special education teacher writing the present levels of performance for an Individualized Education Program. Maybe the teacher is only asking the AI tool to refine a paragraph, but the prompt includes information about a student. We do not want that student information going into a large language model.

New York, NIST 2.0 and the Shift Toward Governance | 21:46

****Host:**** Do you know what triggered this work in New York? Other states and school districts are going to follow. What started it?

****Michelle Krieger:**** CISA identifying education as part of critical infrastructure helped.

When Education Law 2-d arrived, the Regional Information Centers' policy teams took the law, developed policy language for districts and said, "Here is the policy you need to adopt."

That policy said districts would work toward compliance with NIST Cybersecurity Framework 1.1. Now districts must update the policy for NIST 2.0.

Governance is the added function in NIST 2.0, and I could not be happier about that. It means data privacy and security are no longer just IT responsibilities. They are organizational responsibilities.

Governance means people from across the organization come together, make decisions and share responsibility. Technology directors can finally say, "I cannot do this by myself."

****Host:**** When people in a school district hear "data" or "data privacy," where does everybody's head turn?

****Michelle Krieger:**** Toward the technology director.

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The Conflict of Auditing Your Own Work | 23:45

Host: Do you see a problem with putting the DPO role on the technology director?

Michelle Krieger: Yes. It is a complete conflict.

Take network design as an example. CISA has guidance around setting up and segmenting networks. If I am both the DPO and the technology director, I can say, "The network looks great. I set it up and nailed it."

Then I audit it myself.

Auditing is a large part of my day. I audit systems, student information systems and financial systems. I look at what data we collect, how we transfer it and whether those transfers are secure.

I work with department heads to understand what data they have, how they store it, how they share it and whether they need all of it.

In my keynote, I talked about going on a data diet. Districts often keep information because that is how it has always been done. We need to ask what is actually critical and what we truly need in those systems.

Minimalism is a security strategy. If you do not have the data on your network, do not store it and do not carry it, cybercriminals cannot take it.

Building a Team When a Full-Time DPO Is Not Possible | 26:02

Host: How do schools avoid creating another unfunded role that gets dumped on someone who is already wearing too many hats?

Michelle Krieger: My role has changed since I came to Lake Shore. At first, I was primarily signing data privacy agreements, working on software lists and identifying what needed to be protected and where it was located.

Host: For context, how large is Lake Shore?

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****Michelle Krieger:**** We have just under 2,000 students.

****Host:**** So this is not a large New York City district. It is closer to the size of an average district, where roles are often combined.

****Michelle Krieger:**** Right. District leaders often tell me their board has no appetite for adding another administrator. That is the reality. School budgets are not great.

If a district cannot hire a dedicated DPO, the technology director might serve as co-chair of a governance team. But there still needs to be a team addressing data privacy and security.

That team should include the superintendent, business officials, department heads and building principals. Those leaders need to understand how they will take responsibility for data privacy and security within their own parts of the organization.

Set up a governance team. Get buy-in. Explain why the team is needed, what data privacy and security involve and why it is critical to keep students safe on district devices and networks.

*From Chalk Dust to Digital Trust* | 28:09

****Host:**** You are the co-author of **From Chalk Dust to Digital Trust**, which covers much of what we are discussing. How did the book come together, and how can it help technology directors?

****Michelle Krieger:**** I met my co-author, Antoinette King, around 2022. She is from the New York City side of the state. She came to Erie 2 BOCES, where my district is located, to speak about data privacy and security.

She was the first person I saw run a tabletop exercise to test incident response and disaster recovery plans. I was fangirling pretty hard.

At the end of the session, she announced that she had a book to give away. I turned around to the audience and said, "Everybody put your hand down. That book is mine."

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Her first book was **The Digital Citizen's Guide to Cybersecurity**. At the time, I was still spending a lot of time in classrooms and working with librarians. I used her book to help develop lesson plans.

Like any good fangirl, I reached out on LinkedIn. She connected with me, and I told her I thought it would be great to combine what she had written with my perspective on data privacy and security.

She matched my crazy pretty quickly. The next thing we knew, we were writing a book together.

We wanted the book to be a practical guide. I wanted someone to be able to pick it up and say, "I have no idea what she means by data privacy, security and governance, but I am going to read this and figure it out."

The book provides a road map for working with people inside a district to create a governance team and develop the protocols and procedures needed to run it.

Each chapter begins with the objectives, like a teacher putting learning objectives on the board. The chapter then explains the subject, and the questions at the end help readers think through how the ideas apply to their own educational agency.

Through the Western New York DPO Cooperative and conferences around the state, I realized more people needed this information. We included resources for starting a governance team, working with NIST and finding effective training.

Our hope was to provide a good starting point for people who do not know where to begin.

****Host:**** It gets districts from zero to sixty in their thinking and conversations, while leaving room for each district's individual needs. Educators like to share and learn from one another. No one wants to start with a blank sheet of paper every time.

****Michelle Krieger:**** Absolutely.

Starting the Conversation With District Leadership | 32:32

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****Host:**** Technology directors do not want to sound like alarmists, but they may know the district is not doing everything it should around data privacy. They also do not have much bandwidth.

If a technology director needs to have that conversation with the superintendent, where should it begin?

****Michelle Krieger:**** Start with the district safety committee.

You are not likely to walk into a district and find a data privacy and security governance team already established. When I arrived at Lake Shore, I started with the safety committee because those people were already thinking about safety.

The committee also included the key people needed for governance: the superintendent, business official, department directors, building principals, board members and teachers.

Do not begin by thinking you have to create a governance team from scratch. Ease into it. Data privacy and security are a marathon, not a sprint, especially when the technology director is also carrying a second job as the DPO.

Join the safety committee first. Build support there. Then discuss creating a data privacy and security subcommittee that can become the governance team.

Phishing Training Without Turning Staff Against You | 34:38

****Michelle Krieger:**** You also do not want to be an alarmist.

A colleague once sent a phishing simulation without warning anyone. The response to people who clicked a link or opened an attachment was pretty harsh. Staff members were angry, and the teachers' union was not happy.

Do not start that way.

Give people the why. Tell them, "I am not trying to trick you. This is the threat landscape, and this is the reality."

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Show staff news headlines. Show them what is happening in K-12 cybersecurity with ransomware and data breaches. Explain why the district will test them with simulated phishing emails. The purpose is to help them improve.

If someone clicks a link during a simulation, it will not install a virus. It can take them to a page that says, "You made a mistake, but no harm was done. Here is some short training."

Do not assign a 45-minute video. That will put people to sleep. Give them a short lesson that identifies five things in the email that should have made them stop before clicking the link or opening the attachment.

Lighten up a little. Do plenty of training, and give people the why.

What a Breach Does to a School District | 36:28

****Host:**** It is no longer a matter of hoping a district does not get attacked. It is a matter of when. Size does not protect you anymore. What can a breach do to a district?

****Michelle Krieger:**** I explain it to faculty and staff this way: if you have an email address on our domain, you have to be trained. You do not want to be the weakest link.

If a bad actor gets into the network and holds information for ransom, systems go down. That takes time away from students.

If a district is down for two weeks, that creates learning loss. We know from COVID that even a small amount of lost time matters.

Think about the systems that run every two-week pay cycle. I tell bus drivers, "You may not think you have anything to do with data privacy or cybersecurity, but if you click a link that allows an attacker into the network, a system could go down. One of those systems might be payroll."

We often use the phrase "unauthorized release of information" or "unauthorized access to information" because the word "breach" can cause panic. But if it is a breach, it is a breach. You have to name it.

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If a third-party vendor has information it is not supposed to have, that breaks trust. Governance is about trust. An incident can break parents' trust in the district and teachers' trust in the IT department. That effect can last a long time.

Superintendents and boards may say they do not have the appetite to add another administrative position. My response is that we should discuss whether the district can afford what may happen if no one is watching this work and making sure the district follows the law and regulations.

****Host:**** In our previous episode, we spoke with a school district that went through a ransomware attack. It was devastating. Their recovery story was beautiful, but no district wants to experience it.

****Michelle Krieger:**** Nobody wants to go through that.

Testing Backups and Planning for Continuity | 39:45

****Michelle Krieger:**** We talk about tabletop exercises, incident response and disaster recovery. But districts also need to test their backups.

Running a backup and saying, "I got the information back," is one thing. Trying to use that restored backup to operate the district is another.

Take the next step. Restore the backup and attempt to function with it. That is how you learn how resilient your systems really are.

Cyber incidents are stressful. The superintendent will want to know when everything will be back online, when the student information system will return and when financial systems will be available.

If you have not tested recovery, you will not know. Testing gives you a realistic idea of how quickly staff can get systems operating again. Then you can tell the superintendent, "We tested this system six weeks ago, and it took two weeks to restore. That is probably what we are looking at now."

****Host:**** And students are coming to school tomorrow.

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****Michelle Krieger:**** Regardless of what happened. People have lives, and students need to learn whether technology is available or not.

Along with an incident response plan and disaster recovery plan, you need a business continuity plan. We underestimated the importance of that in our region.

If a system is unavailable for two weeks, students will still be in the building. How will the school function? Building principals and teachers need to understand that plan.

It has been a long time since we ran schools with paper and pencil, but we need to know what kind of environment we can provide when technology is not available.

Where a District Should Start | 42:47

****Host:**** If you walked into ten school districts in the Southeast and found that eight of them were not doing something they should, where would you start?

****Michelle Krieger:**** I run a service through my school district and work with other districts in our region. The first thing I do is assess where they are.

Sometimes the picture is not pretty, and that is okay. It is not about judgment. It is simply where the district is today.

There is often some low-hanging fruit within the NIST core functions. Districts may be able to make progress without spending a lot of money by improving policies, procedures and protocols.

But the starting point is a governance team.

When problems emerge, you should not be working in a silo. You need the superintendent's ear, the business official's ear and support from other key leaders. Data privacy and security are organizational issues, not just IT issues.

Honest Assessments and Free Federal Help | 44:26

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****Host:**** The audit piece is important. Districts need to identify where they are today. They may not be where they want to be, but none of us are. A lot of it begins with documenting what you are and are not doing, then learning and improving.

****Michelle Krieger:**** It is cheaper and easier to assess yourself, but is that the best approach?

We have federal partners willing to help. I have contacted CISA and the Department of Homeland Security. At the end of May, our regional DHS team came to our district and performed a rapid assessment.

It was extremely helpful because when you assess yourself, you tend to be kinder than you should be. Nobody wants to give themselves the lowest score. Everyone wants to be a four.

Working with regional partners gives you a fair, quick assessment of your environment. For us, it was priceless and relatively painless.

Two assessors came to the district. The first day was a full-day interview. They asked questions, reviewed documentation and walked through areas that aligned with NIST and CISA's Cybersecurity Performance Goals.

They spent the late afternoon putting everything together and returned the next morning to review what they found.

The assessment did not focus only on weaknesses. They started with strengths. For example, they liked our incident response plan and the fact that it includes outside contacts and our cyber insurance information, helping us avoid taking actions that fall outside the policy.

I recommend keeping cyber insurance information with the incident response plan and considering a standalone cyber insurance policy. I have visited districts that did not have one and encouraged them to look into it.

You Do Not Have to Do This Alone | 47:27

****Host:**** These recommendations should make people think about what they are doing and where their gaps are. Working with someone like you or a colleague in another district can help technology directors see that they are not alone and that the hurdles can be cleared together.

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****Michelle Krieger:**** That is exactly why I created the Western New York DPO Cooperative. People need to know they are not alone in trying to get this work done. Other people are doing it, too.

Tennessee, New York and Florida are building a cooperative relationship now. Being part of that alliance can only benefit us.

****Host:**** That goes back to your first recommendation: get a team. Do not do this by yourself.

****Michelle Krieger:**** Get a team around you.

Final Advice: Be the Department of Yes, But | 48:30

****Host:**** You were a technology director. What is one thing you wish you had known during your first year? What would you tell yourself now?

****Michelle Krieger:**** Do not be the Department of No. Be the Department of Yes, But.

The "but" means making sure you work with vendors that act like partners. They should have good data privacy plans and strong policies around privacy.

****Host:**** We will put a link to the book in the show notes because it is an excellent place to start. Anyone working in K-12 cares about children and their safety. Data safety and protection are part of that.

Michelle, thank you for sitting down with us, sharing your expertise and sharing this resource.

****Michelle Krieger:**** Thank you.