

The Consumer's Perspective
Testimony to the Commission on Online Child Protection
July 21, 2000

The introduction of the Internet into our schools and classrooms offers a genuine promise for improvements in teaching and learning. President Clinton's challenge to connect all of the nation's schools to digital networks has resulted in a revolutionary enthusiasm to make the school house a place where the "digital divide" can be conquered and students of all ages and backgrounds benefit.

With any change, especially wide-spread rapid change, come challenges of philosophy and pedagogy. In offering our students access to the World Wide Web, we have put them in reach of resources that have never before been available. The vast majority of these resources are pathways to subject matter that address local and state standards. School divisions such as mine require a parent/guardian and student signature on an "Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) for Internet Access." This policy states that web access has been established for access of information and research that enhances approved educational goals and objectives. Although our students pledge by their signatures on the AUP that they will not access material that is profane or obscene, that advocates illegal acts, violence, or discrimination toward other people, we, as a school system still feel an obligation to filter their access. Indeed, even before the Virginia Department of Education asked that schools provide filtering for students, Norfolk Public Schools had already made that determination.

Due to information that has been distributed by organizations such as *The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children*, our communities are aware of the pitfalls for child safety on the information highway. Again, due to communication directed at our constituents, Norfolk Public Schools has not received a great deal of objection from parents concerning the filtering and rating of our services. One local news station deployed a crew to Granby High School to attempt to foil our filtering process. Their attempts failed. Following the news broadcast our webmaster received feedback indicating that our customers were grateful for not only the blocking of harmful information, but also the blocking of information that has little to no bearing on our educational goals and objectives.

Could the filtering and rating technologies be construed as being in violation of First Amendment rights? Perhaps. Our concern is that educational web access is being used for appropriate educational purposes.

We, in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia primarily use server- or network-based filtering software that was introduced to us by former NASA "rocket scientists." Working closely with the Consortium for Interactive Instruction, this company offered a product that first met our initial needs and then allowed input for improvements. The product requires user authentication, enables us to customize our filtering list, and provides our webmaster the ability to create "allow lists." The filter, known as Dynamic

Document Review (DDR), is “real time” and examines the requested text in context and in multiple languages making a blocking decision based on the content of the page (that is what words are in proximity of other words) not just one or two words on the page. This allows for the safe use of search engines and pages not yet categorized. The DDR list is updated by a company specialist every 4 to 5 days and downloaded to our servers each time there is a change. The filtering can be tailored to meet the specific needs of every user, classroom, or grade level. Therefore, over-filtering is not the problem that it could be. A first grade class can have different access rights than a senior level or adult education class.

The software tracks each of the users on the network to ensure responsible use, and automatically “locks” a user’s account when the locally specified forbidden access threshold is reached. In Norfolk schools that is three times. Not only does the district webmaster have access to student tracking information, but in our schools, a site-based manager will intervene when this threshold is reached. In addition, we receive e-mail notification from the filtering software company of an account “locks” and alerts. (*See attached examples.*) Parents are notified and students lose their privileges to use web-based resources. In order to regain their Internet privileges, students are required to complete a refresher course on appropriate use of the Internet and have a second AUP signed by their parent.

Although the use of student e-mail is limited in our district, Norfolk also uses a mail software that scans incoming and outgoing messages for inappropriate or objectionable content. It also gives the ability to specify where users may send and receive e-mail from. This feature protects our students from spammers and stalkers.

Within our school system’s classrooms and libraries our children are recipients of the best protection that we know how to provide. In their homes, that may be another matter. We estimate that approximately 20% of our students have access to the Internet at home. Many Internet service providers have filtering options that need to be activated by parents. Family oriented “portals” have been established that offer filtering, free Internet service, and reduced pricing on home computers. We have no way of knowing whether our students are protected in their homes. Empowering and educating our parents, as well as providing access to inexpensive home filtering software that is user friendly could certainly keep our students safe while on the Internet at home.

In closing, I would be remiss if I did not mention that the Telecommunications Act of 1996 has brought schools affordable access to telecommunications. Even the most disadvantaged school divisions have been able to embrace computer/web-based learning and communications. This opens a whole new world to students and teachers. It is important that policy makers and educators insist on no less than the highest standards concerning the resources that will impact our country’s future: our children.

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