

PROMOTING ONLINE SAFETY:

**THE HOME-SCHOOL
PARTNERSHIP**



SAFEGUARDING
THE WIRED SCHOOLHOUSE

A Handbook for School Leaders

Produced by Consortium for School Networking

The Consortium for School Networking has prepared a toolkit of resources to help guide school officials when they talk to parents and other community members about online safety issues. These tools can be used in conjunction with one another, or independently. This short handbook is designed to help you think through the best way to approach this discussion, and how to use the toolkit to frame it. Additional resources are available on the Web site of CoSN's "Safeguarding the Wired Schoolhouse" project at www.safewiredschools.org.

In addition to this handbook, toolkit components include:

- A downloadable flyer to let school officials announce the details of a PTA meeting or other community event on the topic of online safety. The flyer also includes online safety tips for parents.
- A downloadable PowerPoint presentation that can be modified to fit the unique circumstances of each school or school district.
- A short video describing the experiences of two school districts that can be used as a "conversation starter" with parents or other community leaders.

INTRODUCTION

As more and more students access the Internet from school, school leaders are being asked to play a larger role in assuring that children have a positive experience when they go online and that they are using appropriate online learning resources. Passage of the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) in December 2000 imposed new requirements on schools that accepted certain kinds of federal education technology money. This law required schools to solicit public input on an Internet safety policy that addressed specific issues of concern, including protecting children from accessing certain kinds of content.

However, even if schools have already complied with CIPA or are not subject to it, they need to continue to be proactive in communicating with parents and other community members about the strategies that they are pursuing to promote online safety.

In families that have access to a computer, parents need to understand the steps they can take to help ensure that their children use their home computer in a safe and appropriate manner. Because studies show that parents who do not use the Internet are actually more fearful of what may happen to their children than parents who already have access, schools also need to be proactive in addressing the concerns of parents who may not be computer-literate. Finally, if a school hopes to retain public support for its technology goals, it must communicate to other community members that it is using its Internet resources wisely—and preparing students to behave responsibly when they access the Internet from school and other settings.

A HOT-BUTTON ISSUE

Virtually everyone agrees that it is important to take steps to protect children online. But a debate continues to rage over how best to accomplish that. Congress has tried on three occasions since 1996 to restrict what children can view online; each time, the resulting legislation has been challenged in the courts. Activists on one side of the issue are willing to take whatever steps are necessary to block children's access to content that, for a variety of reasons, they feel is inappropriate. Others are concerned that because filters and other technological tools are imperfect, they may go too far in restricting access to useful educational resources. Schools must decide for themselves how best to manage these concerns in light of the resources, both financial and human, that certain approaches will require, as well as the legal issues involved.

Recent experience suggests that a community consensus can be achieved, when persons with diverse perspectives commit the time to become educated and think through the issues involved. For instance, in October 1998, Congress passed the Child Online Protection Act (COPA) and created a commission to study methods for reducing access by minors to sexually explicit online material. The commission's members included representatives of the technology industry and online services, pertinent federal agencies, civil liberties groups, children's activist groups, religious groups, educators and librarians.

In a report released two years later, the COPA Commission concluded that "no single technology or method will effectively protect children from harmful material online." Instead, the commission determined that "a combination of public education, consumer empowerment technologies and methods, increased enforcement of existing laws and industry action" were needed to address the concerns.

In 1998, Congress also called on the National Research Council to conduct a study of "tools and strategies for protecting kids from pornography and their applicability to other inappropriate Internet content." Again, a diverse group of stakeholders wrestled with the issue over a period of 18 months, concluding in May 2002 that "technology cannot provide a complete—or even a nearly complete solution. Indeed, though some might wish otherwise, no single approach—technical, legal, economic or educational—will be sufficient to address all of the relevant issues."

Thus, even when schools adopt a filtering or blocking technology, they still must take steps to teach children how to protect themselves in an unfiltered environment or when blocking technologies fail. Further, parents must understand the nature of the risks their children face so they can take appropriate action at home, and underscore the lessons that educators are trying to teach in the classroom.

WHERE DOES YOUR SCHOOL WANT TO BE?

Communities across the United States—and even schools within a single district—can vary widely in their views on issues that are at the heart of promoting online safety. For starters, you may wish to consider questions like these:

- To what extent is your community computer- or Internet-literate? What proportion of adults access the Internet in their jobs? What proportion of families can access the Internet from their home? What proportion of families have a computer at home?

In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau found, just over half of U.S. households with a school-age child had Internet access. Among families with annual incomes below \$25,000, nearly 3 in

10 had a computer and about 2 in 10 had Internet access. Among households with annual incomes of \$75,000 or more, nearly 9 in 10 had a computer and nearly 8 in 10 had Internet access. Households in the West were most likely to have access (47 percent), while households in the South were the least likely to have access (38 percent). These numbers should give you some guidance on the expected household penetration of computers and Internet access in your own community.

Studies have found that when adults had accessed the Internet, they tended to be less concerned about what their children might find online than those adults who had never accessed the Internet. To the extent that your students' parents regularly use the Internet, they are more likely to view the Internet in a positive light.

- To what extent have textbooks, required reading assignments and library books been an issue in the past? Does the community have a strong tradition of supporting free speech? Or are parents and community activists more likely to be alarmed if children access online materials that they deem to be inappropriate?
- Do you have individual programs or schools within your district where online access should be managed differently than it would for the rest of your district?
- Has your school or school district been the subject of any negative publicity associated with the use of computers by staff members or students? Have any children or adults in your community been lured to meet an online stalker outside their home? Although these kinds of incidents are rare, regrettably they still occur. So recognize that if, for instance, a staff member had to be fired because of inappropriate use of the school's computer resources, it will complicate the communications job that you will face.

IF YOU STILL NEED TO COMPLY WITH CIPA

Schools that are subject to the Children's Internet Protection Act are required to develop an "Internet Safety Policy" and solicit public input on the policy. If you have not yet taken this step, you will need to review the issues that must be addressed by this policy.

Resources on CIPA compliance are available at <http://www.safewiredschools.org/other.html#cipa>. CoSN has also prepared a checklist of questions that you may find useful to review as you consider how best to manage online access. These are available at <http://www.safewiredschools.org/checklist.html>.

It may make sense for the Internet safety policy—and, if necessary, these questions—to be reviewed by a small group of knowledgeable school officials, including administrators, technology staff, and teachers, and then by a larger committee that includes parent and community stakeholders. A document that is presented as the reasoned consensus of individuals representing diverse perspectives is more likely to be accepted without rancorous debate than a document that is positioned as the work of one or two school officials. While this approach may take more time, it is more likely to result in a policy being adopted with minimal conflict.

KEEPING THE STORY POSITIVE

In all your communications with parents and other community members, it's important to keep the focus positive. Everyone wants to do what is necessary to ensure that children have a safe experience when they go online. But it's generally better to frame these discussions in terms of "working to ensure that children have a positive experience online"

rather than “taking steps to protect children from the dangers of cyberspace.” Even when you have adopted a blocking or filtering technology, it is still important to continue to teach students other online safety and information literacy skills so that they will use computers wisely and responsibly, no matter where they are located.

Here are some questions you should consider as you go forward:

1. Have you clearly communicated to your community the steps you are taking to promote online safety and information literacy?
2. Do you regularly communicate to students, staff and parents the specifics of your Acceptable Use Policy and the consequences if those rules are not followed? Having a strong policy in place—and enforcing it—will make it easier for you to respond if school Internet resources are misused.
3. What steps have you taken to help parents protect their children when they use a computer at home? Many good resources have been prepared to help parents understand basic online safety rules. A list is available at <http://www.safewiredschools.org/other.html>.

WORKING WITH THE TOOLKIT

Components of the Safeguarding the Wired Schoolhouse toolkit have been designed so that you can use them together or individually. Here is more information about the resources and suggestions for using them:

- **Two-sided flyer.** This flyer is designed to provide parents with some basic tips on how they can help safeguard their children if they access the Internet from home. One side of the flyer can also be customized by a school or school district to publicize a parent-teacher meeting devoted to online safety issues. This document can be downloaded, edited and reproduced. It can also be redistributed through school- and district-level Web sites.
- **“Promoting Online Safety: The Home-School Partnership” video.** This short, 10-minute video highlights the experiences of two school districts, one in Pennsylvania and one in Kansas, as they worked through questions surrounding the best way to protect students when they go online. The video also highlights the need for parents to work in partnership with educators to help protect children. The video is designed to be shown at the start of a program for parents or community leaders to help frame the discussion that will follow.
- **“Promoting Online Safety: The Home-School Partnership” PowerPoint presentation.** This presentation can be used, either with the video or on its own. It is designed to make it easy for local school officials to present information about the safety strategies they are pursuing to an audience of parents and/or community members. The presentation also highlights what steps parents need to take to ensure that their children use the Internet in a safe manner when they are using computers away from school.

These resources are available online at <http://www.safewiredschools.org/toolkit>. Additional resources will continue to be made available on the Web site of the Safeguarding the Wired Schoolhouse project. We hope you will continue to check them out!

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