

Dear Sirs and Madams:

Please consider the following for your Backtalk column in a future Phi Delta Kappan. Thanks. - Doug

While I find little with which to disagree in the fine article “Just Give It to Me Straight: A Case Against Filtering the Internet,” May 2004 Kappan, Callister and Burbules ignore a sad reality: the horse is already out of the barn on the filtering issue for practically all public schools.

Most school districts were coerced into installing an Internet filter during the 2001 school year in order to comply with the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA) guidelines, and so remain eligible for eRate and other federal funds.

The question then is not whether to have filters, but how to use them as wisely as possible to prevent many of the harms Callister and Burbules point out.

Internet filters have a wide range of restrictiveness. Depending on the product, the product’s settings, and the ability to override the filter to permit access to individual sites, filters can either block a high percentage of the Internet resources (specific websites, email, chat rooms, etc.) or a relatively small number of sites.

As proponents of intellectual freedom, educators should:

- Base the choice of filters not on cost or convenience, but on features and customizability.
- Strongly advocate for the least restrictive settings of installed filters.
- Keep the decisions about how and what is filtered at a local a level as possible, discouraging state or regional filtering.
- Generously use the override lists in our Internet filters, allowing any site deemed educationally relevant by any professional educator to be automatically included in the override lists. (This should *not* be a decision left to IT personnel.)
- Configure at least one machine that is completely unblocked in every library media center so that questionably blocked sites can be reviewed and immediately accessed by staff and students if found to be useful.
- Continue to help develop and teach the values students need to be self-regulating Internet users.
- Continue to educate and inform parents and the public about school Internet uses and issues.
- Continue to create learning environments that promote the use of the Internet for positive purposes.

I believe schools can use a limited filtering system that keeps the little ones from accidentally accessing inappropriate or even dangerous websites, but still allows a generous degree of intellectual freedom.

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