

Internet Filters Block Our Education

by DD

Did you know that in our school, we are not allowed to research the effects of violent video games on children for Social Studies; post a story about learning to play baseball on a class website in ELA; and read about breast cancer in Health class? The filtering software that controls how the Internet comes into school does not allow us to look at pages with words like "video game", "baseball" or "breast. These rules may be meant to protect us from dirty pictures and wasting time but in fact they just make it hard to find out what we need to know. Our school district should change the Internet filter settings so that they do not block important information. Schools should concentrate on teaching their students to be smart web users instead.

Internet filters make it hard for students to do online research for school projects because the websites they need are blocked. For example, at Murray Burgtraum High School in New York City, a school that was evacuated on September 11th because it was so close to the World Trade Center, students tried to write research papers on terrorism. They found that the web filter did not allow them to see any pages that included the word "terrorism" (<http://www.wired.com/culture/education/news/2002/09/54632>). Their social studies teacher, Mr. Elfrank-Dana said, "To have students constantly thwarted and denied access to a legitimate link is extremely frustrating." This happens a lot. According to the Electronic Frontier Foundation (http://www.oreillynet.com/onlamp/blog/2002/09/internet_filtering_hurts_those.html), schools that block the Internet using the "most restrictive settings" (the strongest filter) "block up to 70% of search results based on state-mandated curriculum topics." The filters keep students from doing serious school work.

Another reason that strong Internet filters are not a good idea is that they don't actually protect students from the sites the schools don't want them to see. Since the filters make it so hard to look at sites, students have learned to get around them. In my class there are always one or two people who know the latest way to get around the Internet filter. You can tell who they are because they are the ones looking at their MySpace pages in school. According to a CNET article called *Kids Outsmart Web Filters* (http://news.com.com/Kids+outsmart+Web+filters/2009-1041_3-6062548.html), there are other kids like this across the country. Schools figure out what these students are doing and fix the Internet again, but the kids find new strategies just as fast as the old ones are shut down.

Some people may argue that when schools use strong Internet filters they are just following the law. The Federal Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) says that schools and libraries have to protect students from "material that is harmful to minors" in order to get a government discount on their communications bill (<http://www.ncsl.org/programs/lis/cip/filterlaws.htm>). This argument is wrong because schools have a choice about how strict they make their filters. "A little bit of filtering is O.K., but more isn't necessarily better," said Vicky Rideout, Vice President of the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. "If they are set too high, they can be a serious obstacle to health information." Her researchers found that when Internet filters were set too high, they didn't block much more pornography but they did block a lot of really good sites. Instead of stronger filters, the National Research Council suggests that children be taught media literacy skills that will help them find out what is good and bad content on their own. They compared surfing the web to learning to swim.

"Swimming pools can be dangerous for children. To protect them, one can install locks, put up fences, and deploy pool alarms. All of these measures are helpful, but by far the most important thing that one can do for one's children is teach them to swim."

Students don't need to be protected from the Internet. They need to be taught how to use it safely. Whenever you are blocked by the Internet filter, send an email to the principal. Demand media literacy classes. Internet filters are not smart enough to know the difference between playing video games and studying the effects of video games on children. Students are. We should be given the chance to make responsible decisions on our own.

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