

U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Hearing on Protecting Children on the Internet
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, my name is Lan Neugent and I am the Assistant Superintendent for Technology and Human Resources at the Virginia Department of Education and past chairman of the State Educational Technology Directors Association. I am pleased to be here today to share Virginia's perspective on education's role in protecting children on the Internet.

House Bill 58, introduced by Delegate William H. Fralin, Jr., and passed by the 2006 Virginia General Assembly, was signed into law by Governor Timothy M. Kaine on March 7, 2006. This new law made Virginia the first state in the nation to require Internet safety to be integrated into all instructional programs statewide. The law expanded the existing statute, which was adopted in 1999. The existing statute defined acceptable use policies and practices; the new law added the requirement that the Superintendent of Public Instruction issue Internet safety guidelines to school divisions.

Dr. Tammy McGraw, Director of the Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology, and her staff were charged with developing a guidance document for local school divisions (See Appendix A). The overall approach was one of balance, recognizing the need to address the risks and highlight the benefits of Internet use in schools. We wanted this guidance to reflect our belief that the Internet offers unprecedented access to resources that can enhance learning, research, communications, exploration of new ideas, and expressions of creativity. At the same time, we wanted educators and students to understand that the dangers associated with the Internet are real, significant, and constantly changing.

To develop the guidelines, agency staff consulted with students; parents; educators; researchers; law enforcement; local, state and federal representatives; and independent nonprofit organizations. These consultations and an extensive review of research and resource materials led to the following essential conclusions regarding an effective Internet safety program:

Internet safety must be a shared responsibility.

Children and the many adults in their lives all play important roles in ensuring safe and responsible Internet use. In developing the guidelines for schools, we identified key issues that each role group—from students to school board members—should know.

Internet safety must be integrated into the curriculum as part of a teacher’s daily practice.

Our work showed that Internet safety cannot be covered in a single lesson or unit or by using a single program or resource. The Internet is pervasive in children’s lives; strategies for ensuring safe and responsible use must reflect the many ways in which children experience the Internet. We developed a guide to provide teachers with strategies for addressing Internet safety in the context of Virginia’s Standards of Learning (See Appendix B).

There are many high-quality resources available to schools free of charge; however, schools and families need to be aware that they exist.

We have reviewed many excellent resources that address various aspects of Internet safety for schools and families. Our greatest challenges are helping schools identify the most appropriate resources and ensuring they have the ability to use these resources effectively to cover the full spectrum of issues. Unlike books and other traditional resources, Internet content changes every second of every day. As a result, we routinely apprise school divisions of new developments related to Internet safety. Our information briefs provide summaries of the most current research (See Appendix C). This is a continual process due to the ever-changing risks on the Internet.

Technical assistance and professional development must be available to school divisions as they design locally appropriate programs for their students.

Each community is unique, and Internet safety issues tend to vary greatly from one part of the Commonwealth to another. We provide technical assistance as divisions move forward with designing their comprehensive Internet safety programs. Divisions request assistance from the state Department of Education on a wide range of Internet-related issues; most notably, they struggle with the need to balance safety and security with instructional innovation. Social networking sites and blogs have been particularly challenging for school divisions.

Virginia is fortunate to have approximately 1,500 instructional technology resource teachers who work directly in schools to help integrate technology into instruction. These highly skilled educators receive extensive professional development and support from our agency. They, in turn, provide training and support for the teachers in their schools. Library media specialists and school administrators also receive professional development through conferences and regional events. These educators are essential to our Internet safety program implementation.

Program implementation must be monitored to ensure quality and effectiveness.

To assist division superintendents, we have developed a set of rubrics that measure the degree to which each division has adapted its acceptable use policy and implemented an Internet safety program (See Appendix D). These tools enable divisions to track their progress and determine technical assistance needs.

Public-private collaboration is essential.

Protecting children on the Internet is a daunting task that requires the commitment of everyone. We have been particularly successful in working with other organizations, both public and private, to advance Internet safety in Virginia. Attorney General Bob McDonnell launched a Youth Internet Safety Task Force comprised of leaders from prominent Internet companies, educators, parents, elected officials, and law enforcement to identify solutions to the growing problem of sexual offenders and other criminals who use the Internet to target children and teenagers in the Commonwealth. This group's work has formed the basis for significant legislation and programs to advance Internet safety in Virginia.

We have worked closely with Bedford County Sheriff Michael J. Brown and the Operation Blue Ridge Thunder Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force as well as James Madison University's Institute for Infrastructure and Information Assurance, the National Cyber Security Alliance, and other organizations devoted to Internet safety and security. Furthermore, we have engaged in direct dialogues with companies to help shape their products and services to address Internet safety concerns.

All of these efforts are converging toward one principal objective: maximizing the potential of the Internet while ensuring the safety of each student. Safe and responsible Internet use is at the forefront of all our efforts, even as we develop cutting-edge Internet applications that range from online testing to studying astronomy in the daytime through a remotely controlled telescope in Australia.