

Testimony of:

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On:

Digital Media Safety and Literacy Education and Youth Risk Online Prevention and Intervention

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Good Afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on important issues related to the safety and well-being of young people when using digital media. I would like to start with a wonderful quote from a very wise man, the honorable Richard Thornburgh set forth in the National Research Council publication, Youth, Pornography and the Internet.

“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 to teach them to swim.”

It is impossible to effectively teach all young people to swim if: Their parents and teachers only know how to paddle in the shallow part of the pool or are afraid to get wet. Despite the fact that they have grown up in the water and most have excellent swimming skills, they are constantly warned that water is dangerous and filled with sharks. They are instructed to avoid normal swimming behavior and to tell an adult if they feel uncomfortable - but they know that many adults can't swim and fear that adults will respond by yanking them out of the pool. They can't jump into a swimming pool while at school because it is considered too risky.

Let's describe the vision for what we need to accomplish. I describe this as follows: Schools are effectively using Web 2.0 technologies to prepare students for their future education and careers, civic responsibilities, and personal life in the 21st Century. All young people understand digital media safety and literacy issues and demonstrate competence in keeping themselves safe, engaging in responsible behavior that respects the rights of others, and taking responsibility for the well-being of others. Effective risk prevention and intervention programs have been established to respond to the concerns of the minority of young people who are at greater risk of engaging in unsafe or irresponsible online behavior or victimized by others. And lastly, and filled with promise, digital technologies are effectively being used to provide young people with information, self-help resources, adult support, peer support networks, and crisis intervention to support their health and well-being.

Fortunately, sufficient research has been conducted addressing various aspects of youth risk online that it is now possible to make preliminary conclusions about these concerns.

The young people who are in the greatest risk online are the ones who are already at greater risk in the “real world.” These young people are more likely to have significant psychosocial concerns, engage in risk taking behavior, and have disrupted relations with their parents, caregivers, and other adults in their school and community.

Effectively addressing these concerns will require the implementation of effective risk prevention and intervention approaches guided by mental health professionals.

Sometimes, these “at risk” young people may be the victims of criminal acts or may engage in criminal behavior, thus the involvement of professionals in juvenile justice and delinquency prevention is also necessary.

Most frequently, harmful online situations involve known peers. The far more common situations include both offline and online harmful personal relationship altercations.

Regardless of where young people are when they engage in harmful online interactions, the harmful impact will frequently be at school, because this is where young people are physically together. Effectively addressing these concerns will require effective school-based prevention and intervention programs.

The majority of teens appear to be generally making good choices online, report healthy responses to negative online incidents, and report that they are not distressed by these incidents. But this is a new environment in which young people are interacting and the period of childhood and adolescence is a time of exploration and risk taking. Young people are making mistakes online that can be prevented through education and adult involvement. The fact that the majority of teens are generally making good choices supports the conclusion that social norms/peer leadership risk prevention approaches will be effective. Because the majority of teens are generally making good choices and are not at risk, especially not at risk of being criminally victimized or engaging in criminal behavior, educational approaches that seek to convince them that they are at great risk and should avoid normative online behavior are worse than woefully ineffective. Such fear-based programs convince youth that adults do not understand and cannot be trusted.

Teens whose parents are both actively and positively involved in their children’s online activities demonstrate the lowest levels of risky behavior online. Generating fear about Internet risk appears not to lead to greater or effective parent involvement. Parent education approaches must shift from seeking to generate fear to providing guidelines on how parents can be actively and positively involved. Parenting approaches must be determined by age, development, and risk factors of the individual child. Schools are important conduits for education and outreach to parents.

Risk prevention approaches are often divided into two types of initiatives: Universal initiatives provide education about risk concerns to the entire population. Targeted interventions are directed at those youth who are at higher risk or are engaging in higher risk behavior. This is the approach that I and other Internet safety risk prevention professionals recommend.

In order to effectively implement universal education about digital media safety and literacy it is necessary to address the essential foundation. Our schools must be using these technologies for instruction. It is impossible to prepare students for their digital media enriched future without these technologies. U.S. effectiveness and competitiveness is also dependent on this.

On top of all of the other barriers our schools face, two barriers are directly related to ineffective responses to Internet safety concerns.

The first is the misplaced reliance on filtering to manage student Internet use. Filtering is a web 1.0 protection approach - it protects against accessing objectionable material. But it is not effective in doing so when used by teens. Why? Because at the same time the federal government was requiring schools to spend millions of dollars on filtering, it was also providing funding to develop technologies that freedom fighters in countries in Asia and the Middle East can use to bypass filters and achieve anonymity. It is not possible to keep teens in electronically fenced play yards. We need more effective approaches to manage student student Internet use. But if students are engaged in relevant, exciting instruction using these technologies, misuse is much less of a concern.

The second barrier is all of the fear-mongering about youth risk online that has created the misperception that all youth are at high risk of criminal victimization when using web 2.0 interactive technologies. They are clearly not at risk. But this fear has led too many educational leaders to resist integrating the use of these technologies for instruction. So we need to delete the fear and focus on the legitimate risks, not the rare instances of criminal victimization or behavior.

To provide universal digital media safety and literacy instruction will require appropriate instructional objectives, effective curriculum and instructional approaches, and teachers who understand the issues. The Broadband Act, which has added a requirement to teach Internet safety to the Children's Internet Prevention Act has and will continue to stimulate activity in this area. There are many initiatives emerging that seek to outline instructional objectives. Effective curriculum is coming into the market place. Professional development efforts are under way.

Two current challenges are the legacy Internet safety curriculum that has been developed with funding through the Department of Justice or materials developed by state attorneys general. Much of this material is overly focused on the rare instances of criminal victimization, presents inaccurate information, and uses an ineffective "scare tactics" instructional approach. What we have is Reefer Madness and "Just say 'no'" revisited. This kind of curriculum teaches young people not to trust adults.

The second barrier is the significant degree of professional development that is necessary. Of particular importance is raising the level of understanding of health educators and counselors, whose instructional involvement is essential. It is not appropriate for our educational technology staff to teach about risky sexual online concerns.

My recommendations to address universal digital media safety and literacy education are to ensure that there are requirements to do so as part of school planning by incorporating this requirement into the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Thus,

in addition to the incentive provided by the Broadband Act, this would stimulate multidisciplinary planning. Congress could also provide discretionary grants to state and local education agencies to stimulate innovative curriculum and instruction. I do not recommend federal funding of digital media safety and literacy curriculum. Development of this curriculum is best left to the private sector.

To address youth risk online will require effective prevention and intervention strategies. We will have to accomplish these in a new way however. Traditional risk prevention requires the implementation of evidence-based best practices. There are not evidence-based best practices to address youth risk online and will likely never be any. The research insight is still emerging. And the digital technologies and ways in which they are used continue to rapidly change. It can take a decade to conduct the research, develop a program, obtain funding, implement the program, collect and assess the data, write and publish the results.

What we must do is shift to a continuous improvement model. Fortunately, there is already statutory guidance on how to do this. In the safe schools program there is a provision that allows grantees to seek a waiver of the Principles of Effectiveness requirement to respond to new challenges. To obtain a waiver requires an effective statement of the problem, a strategic plan, evidence of likelihood of success, and an evaluation plan.

The major challenge in this area is the decision not to seek funding for the state and local safe school programs, Title IV. It is my understanding that this program is being redesigned, which is good. But it is essential to retain the critical state and school safe school infrastructure to address these new concerns.

My recommendations to effectively address youth risk online are as follows: Restore structural funding to the state and local safe schools programs. In the reauthorization of ESEA, require the development of safe school plans that address these new risks. Establish a new discretionary grant program that emulates the multidisciplinary approach of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students program, that is a program that is jointly coordinated by the Department of Mental Health, Department of Education, and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Funding initiatives under this program could be directed at community mental health programs, school-based programs, and programs to address criminal victimization or behavior. Funding for professional development initiatives and for programs that use digital media for the delivery of risk prevention and intervention should also be supported. This new grant program would fund well-designed, innovative projects that have a strong evaluation component.

With respect to the legislation currently before this Subcommittee, I have attached a statement of opposition to HR 6123 that has been signed by all of this nation's leading authorities on the issue of cyberbullying. While we agree that attention must be paid to this new concern, trying to make this a federal criminal offense is ludicrous for the reasons we have outlined.

The current approach of the Wasserman-Schultz Adolescent Web Awareness Requires Education Act is entirely unacceptable for two reasons.

The first reason is that the sole focus of this legislation is on the rare instances of Internet crime. This bill would perpetuate the misunderstanding and fear that young people are at high risk of criminal victimization when online, which simply is not the case. Curriculum that seeks to impart such misunderstanding and fear would be rejected by young people, cause young people to distrust adults, and would not lead to more effective parenting around these issues. The delivery of such curriculum would greatly diminish the opportunities for schools to shift to 21st Century instruction using these interactive technologies, thus harming U.S. effectiveness and competitiveness, and impairing the ability of U.S. students to be effective and productive citizens.

The second concern is directing funding to the Department of Justice. While DOJ clearly must be involved in addressing these concerns, there is a far greater need to mobilize the mental health and education communities. A three-part partnership is necessary, with the vast majority of the funds disseminated to grantees whose programs are aligned with the Departments of Mental Health and Education.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss these issues with you.