

FYI

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## Schools soon required to teach web safety

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Bill passed by Congress also calls on federal officials to track broadband penetration

From staff and wire service reports

Primary Topic Channel: Safety &amp; security

Schools receiving e-Rate discounts on their telecommunications services and internet access soon will have to educate their students about online safety, sexual predators, and cyber bullying, thanks to federal legislation passed in both the Senate and the House.

The Broadband Data Improvement Act (S.1492), sponsored by Senate Commerce Committee Chairman Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, requires the Federal Trade Commission to carry out a national public awareness program focused on educating children how to use the internet in safe and responsible ways. The legislation also establishes an "Online Safety and Technology Working Group" charged with evaluating online safety education efforts, parental control technologies, filtering and blocking software, and more.

As time ticked down on the 110th Congress, many people believed the original web-safety bill, the Protecting Children in the 21st Century Act, sponsored by Republican Sen. Ted Stevens of Alaska, would fail to see any final action. Stevens is on trial for allegedly failing to report gifts.

The Protecting Children in the 21st Century Act included language, supported by several educational technology advocacy groups, requiring schools receiving e-Rate funds to teach students about appropriate behavior on social networking and chat room web sites, as well as the dangers of cyber bullying.

The Senate Commerce Committee merged the language in Stevens' bill into the Broadband Data Improvement Act, which focuses on establishing new studies to track the penetration of U.S. broadband internet access. The bill passed through both chambers of Congress, and President Bush is expected to sign the legislation soon.

The bill reflects the concerns of parents, teachers, and others that children might meet sexual predators while on social networking sites or talking online in chat rooms. Increased media attention on online harassment and cyber bullying, including several cases where students have suffered severe emotional problems or have committed suicide after online taunts, also have influenced the bill.

Legislation introduced in 2006, the Deleting Online Predators Act, would have required schools and libraries to block access to social networking sites and chat rooms. But many K-12 groups opposed that bill, citing federal intrusion on school districts' rights to control content and arguing that education about safe and appropriate online behavior was a better approach.

Ed-tech advocacy groups are generally happy with the newly passed version of the legislation.

"The internet contains valuable content, collaboration, and communication opportunities that can, and do, materially contribute to a student's academic growth and preparation for the workforce," said representatives from the Consortium for School Networking and the International Society for Technology in Education in a joint statement.

"However, we recognize that students need to learn how to avoid inappropriate content and unwanted contacts from strangers while online. ... Educating students on how to keep themselves safe while online is the best line of defense, because no technological silver bullet has yet been devised that will guarantee that students are effectively protected. Therefore, we embrace wholeheartedly the thoughtful approach that S.1492 takes, particularly the flexibility that it affords districts on determining how best to educate students about staying safe online."

Inouye said passing the bill, which also will track the penetration of broadband service, is the first step to nationwide broadband access.

"If the United States is to remain a world leader in technology, we need a national broadband network that is second to none," he said. "The federal government has a responsibility to ensure the continued rollout of broadband access, as well as the successful deployment of the next generation of broadband technology."

Congress also approved a continuing resolution for FY09 appropriations that will fund all federal education programs--including the Enhancing Education Through Technology (EETT) block-grant program--at last year's levels until March 6. President Bush signed the appropriations measure on Sept. 30, the last day of the previous fiscal year.

The legislation means no final decision on FY09 education spending levels will be made until a new president takes office with a new Congress. Democrats are widely expected to retain control of Congress next year, though observers say the continuing financial crisis--coupled with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan--will make it exceedingly difficult for the nation's next president to push for additional education funds in FY09 and potentially FY10.

**Link:**

Broadband Data Improvement Act

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