



NCLIS

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News Release

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For Immediate Release

NCLIS Opposes Legislation to Restrict E-Rate

National Commission Links Access and Learning Issues in Resisting New Legal Requirement Being Considered by Congress

Washington, DC. USA, November 3, 2006—The U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) today announced its concern about proposed legislation that will, if enacted, require all schools and libraries which receive federal funds to restrict access to digital social networking tools and online communities. Particularly affected, according the Commission Chair Beth Fitzsimmons of Ann Arbor, MI will be schools and libraries receiving discounted telecommunication services under the E-rate, the familiar program name of the extension of Universal Service authorized by Congress in the Telecommunication Act of 1996.

“More than 95% of the schools and public libraries in the United States offer Internet access to the public,” Dr. Fitzsimmons said. “Funding provided by the e-rate program underwrites much of this access. Thanks to the e-rate program, schools and libraries are able to obtain discounts ranging from 20% to 90% for telecommunications services, and the deeper discounts go to communities with the greatest need.”

The program is remarkably successful, according to Dr. Fitzsimmons.

“Since 1998,” she said, “the program has provided more than \$13 billion of support to schools and libraries for acquiring telecommunication and Internet access. Now that support is threatened. Many libraries and schools will be greatly disadvantaged if new restrictions are added.”

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According to a recent study prepared under contract for the Commission, the success of the program is widely documented. In Augusta, ME for example, e-rate funds enabled the school district to participate in the Maine Distance Learning Project, giving students access to language and Advanced Placement classes (as well as virtual field trips). In Mays Landing, NJ the library is able to provide patrons with many services via its web page, including an online multimedia catalog system, an online reservation system, a free audio book download site, and an online book club, as well as links to subscription databases. Additionally, at the library in Mays Landing the network infrastructure, built with e-rate discounted funds, is so well designed and functional that the library has been able to procure grants to pay for the digitization of county periodicals and historical records, including immigration documents. In Santa Fe, NM, the only school for the deaf in the state uses the discounted programs to expose children, some as young as two or three years old, to technology that gives them a communication method they will use for the rest of their lives.

Under current law, the Children's Internet Protection Act already requires schools and libraries receiving discounted services to block or filter Internet access to visual depictions that are obscene, contain child pornography, or are harmful to minors (certification that access is filtered is required with the application). The proposed legislation, the Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006, will go further, requiring schools and libraries that receive universal service support to enforce a policy that prohibits access to a commercial social networking website or chat room.

"The Commissioners believe that the proposed legislation is overly broad," said Dr. Fitzsimmons, "and we of the Commission would be remiss in our statutory responsibility if we did not advise the President and Congress – as we are required by law to do – of the Commission's concerns in this matter."

Dr. Fitzsimmons noted, with the passage of DOPA, "wikis, blogs, and even Amazon.com and Wikipedia could be construed as 'social networking sites,' a situation which would have negative effects on learning and the access to information and knowledge required for learning. Indeed, even faculty who regularly use blogs and teachers who use webpage design in their instructional methods would be seriously hampered in their work."

"From our perspective," Dr. Fitzsimmons continued, "communicating with children and educating them about how to use the Internet is as important as teaching them how to cross a busy highway. The best approach is to teach children the skills they need to cross the highway safely, not forbid them to cross the highway – whether it is one filled with busy traffic or the information highway of the Internet."

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ABOUT NCLIS

The U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) is a permanent, independent agency of the Federal government charged by Public Law 91-345 to advise the President and Congress on national and international library and information policies, to appraise and assess the adequacies and deficiencies of library and information resources and services, and to develop overall plans for meeting national library and information needs.

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