

Filtering Considerations for Schools

The purpose of this document is to assist educators in exploring the issue of content filtering in their school.

Digital citizenship is fast becoming a focus for New Zealand educators. NetSafe's recent poll on the important skills of digital citizens, revealed that New Zealand educators see *ethical behaviour* and *critical thinking* as vital for their students.

There are many opportunities for young people to learn and develop these digital citizenship skills in an educational environment with the classroom teacher as a guide and mentor, but some educators see content filtering as hampering these teaching and learning opportunities.

This document is divided into 4 sections. The first 3 sections have information about specific aspects of content filtering. Section 4 lists further discussion points for educators. There are quick links at the end of the document for further information.

- 1. Filtering categories and management**
- 2. Missed opportunities**
- 3. Effectiveness and value for money**
- 4. Discussion points**

Section 1. Filtering categories and management

Filtering aims to minimise the risk of students accessing inappropriate or illegal material. There is little doubt that educators would agree on filtering pornographic, violent, racist or criminal content for students. There is little doubt that students should have access to the wide range of educationally appropriate sites.

Generally web filtering software blocks a default set of content categories, *i.e. adult material, gambling, file sharing*. The categories in turn determine which sites are unavailable for viewing.

One of the issues schools face is how sites are categorized. Some educators report that filtering categories may be too narrowly defined and that educationally appropriate content is miscategorised.

Filtering services operating in New Zealand provide schools the mechanism to unblock sites that school personnel have determined appropriate for viewing. Essentially schools can put their own filtering policies in place to best fit their context.

Steady growth and changes in online content, however, can make blocking / unblocking sites an ongoing process for a school. It may be difficult for teachers to effectively manage content filtering if they lack knowledge about the process or internal procedures are cumbersome.

Section 2. Missed opportunities

Some educators feel filtering may be preventing opportunities for students to develop their own 'filtering skills' so they have the critical awareness of what is appropriate in their learning context.

The dilemma often lies in restricting or allowing access to sites that sit at a debatable point somewhere along a continuum of educationally valid and appropriate content. An additional challenge is created in allowing or restricting sites that provide a range of content. *YouTube* is a hotly debated example.

Some *YouTube* videos may be useful classroom resources while others would not be appropriate in schools. New Zealand teachers have reported that strict web filtering blocks potentially legitimate and valuable content for both them and their students

School access to sites like Facebook may provide opportunities for valuable teacher-guided discussion about cyberbullying, identity theft, managing a digital footprint, ethical behaviour online. Content filtering, however, has to be viewed

within the context of teacher confidence, school culture, and the trust relationships among members of the school community.

Section 3. Effectiveness and value for money

Filtering can become less effective as a cyber safety tool as students mature. Some older primary and secondary students may have web enabled personal devices at school or have skills to bypass the school's filtering system. This creates both the opportunity and the need for learners to build personal cyber safety skills and knowledge. This means schools must continuously assess the risks and benefits of filtering.

Internet filtering can be a delicate balancing act and not just in terms of content. Blocking sites may be a bandwidth issue for schools that are concerned about escalating costs.

A site that offers streaming video may have educationally appropriate content but regular use of the site can be costly. School administrators in collaboration with teachers must be able to determine the overall value to staff and students alongside the costs.

Section 4. Discussion points

These questions could be used in staff discussions to explore content filtering in your school context.

- How can we determine the readiness of our students to act responsibly in a moderately filtered or un filtered environment?
- Should we create levels of filtering based on age or student responsibility?
- Have we considered the overall effectiveness of content filtering when students may have access to web enabled devices (i.e. cell phones) that cannot be filtered?
- How can we deal with instances where students have strategies to bypass a school's filtering software?
- Do we have a clear procedure for customising filtering for our school?
- What are the expectations of our parents and caregivers regarding content filtering?
- Is our filtering restricting access to valuable educational content?
- Does internet content filtering keep our students safe?

Quick links for Further Information

The Ministry of Education provides schools with a selection of managed internet service solutions to enable them to configure services to meet their own individual internet management requirements.

[Managed Internet Services for Schools](#)

NetSafe provides a central hub of content for educators to address all aspects of cybersafety and digital citizenship in their school.

<http://www.mylgp.org.nz>

NetSafe develops guidelines and discussions documents in collaboration with New Zealand educators. The NetSafe team would like to thank all who take time to provide comments and feedback. We are always interested in talking to educators about how they use NetSafe resources. If you have comments or suggestions about this document or any NetSafe services, please contact us at queries@netsafe.org.nz