

Senator Jeff Piccola  
Library Internet Access Press Conference  
February 28, 2001

Good morning.

In the past six years, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has nearly tripled its funding for public libraries, making us the third highest state in the nation when it comes to library funding.

In his annual budget address, Governor Tom Ridge proposed another record investment for our libraries in the amount of \$94 million for fiscal year 2001-2002.

In addition, the Governor proposed \$8.7 billion in education spending for the coming year -- amounting to nearly half of Pennsylvania's total budget.

As you can conclude from these numbers, the Commonwealth is making significant investments in our schools, in our public libraries, in our communities, and in our children.

Some of this taxpayer money is, of course, being used to connect school libraries and public libraries with the Internet. This is a tremendous tool that no school or library should be without, and Representative Egolf and I support the idea that more Pennsylvanians -- including our children -- should be computer and technology literate.

Unfortunately, there is material on the Internet that the vast majority of Pennsylvanians would find objectionable -- ranging from the merely obscene, to the blatantly pornographic, to the downright disturbing.

It's our belief that this material simply has no place in our public schools or libraries. But according to the Family Research Council, more and more people -- including children -- are accessing pornography and other offensive material by logging on to computers in their libraries and schools.

In a recent report, the Council stated that thousands of incidents have been documented in cities across the nation where patrons used computers in public libraries to access pornography.

Many libraries have initiated policies to protect their patrons from obscene material on the Internet. But unfortunately, policies aren't enough. They have to be backed up with prevention measures -- such as filtering software -- to keep users from gaining access to objectionable material.

Late last year, Congress passed the "Children's Internet Protection Act," which is intended to protect minors from accessing harmful material on the Internet. All we are proposing today is that Pennsylvania law mirror the federal law with the same basic concept -- when taxpayer dollars are involved, libraries must work with us to ensure kids are protected.

Not long ago, a constituent in my district contacted my office to relate an incident in which she had observed a boy of about 10 years old who was looking at pornography on a computer in a local library -- in plain view of the librarian's desk. When the boy noticed the woman watching him, he clicked on a different website to change what was on his screen. When the woman reported the incident to the library, she was told that there was nothing they could do about it. We're fortunate that Darlene Thumma of Dauphin County is with us today and we will hear from her directly about this incident and her support for this legislation.

Let me just stress once again that this library and all of our other public libraries are being funded in large part by record-setting amounts of state taxpayer dollars, and that its Internet access -- through which this little boy was looking at pornographic material -- is being paid for by hard-working Pennsylvanians.

If this or any other publicly-funded library across the state were to set out copies of pornographic magazines on its shelves -- would we tolerate it?

Of course not.

If a public library made pornographic videos available to its patrons -- would we tolerate it?

Of course not.

And yet, some libraries seem to have the opinion that viewing pornography on their computers is okay.

The American Library Association, which calls itself "The Voice of America's Libraries," refuses to address this problem. This organization was, in fact, the lead plaintiff in challenging the Communications Decency Act.

On its own website, the American Library Association says that filtering software that is used to prevent people from accessing pornography may be a helpful tool for the home, but that it is -- quote -- "not appropriate in a public place such as the library."

This organization also says that it cannot support the use of filtering software because it has not been -- quote-unquote -- "perfected."

As for putting filters on library computers that are used only by children, the American Library Association still does not advocate their use, saying instead -- and I quote again -- "We believe parents should decide for their own children what they wish them to see and read."

The Association says that parents are encouraged to accompany their children to the library and supervise their Internet use -- which is admirable, certainly, but how realistic is it? After all, many kids go to the library without their parents. And don't we need to protect our children most when we're not around?

It's astounding to me that any library which represents its community as a place for learning, and for so many other worthwhile resources, could claim that adults and children alike have the right to view objectionable material on their computer equipment.

But that's essentially what the American Library Association is saying.

Now let me tell you what the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is saying through the legislation that Representative Egolf and I are proposing today:

The state spends billions of dollars every year on our public schools and libraries, and therefore we have the right -- and the duty -- to protect all of our citizens, regardless of their age, from obscene material and pornography received over publicly-funded computer equipment.

This legislation would require public schools and libraries to have an acceptable-use policy for Internet access, including filtering programs and appropriate measures for those who violate the policy.

Most importantly, this measure also provides a financial incentive: Any public library that does not comply with the law would have its state funding withheld.

It's that simple.

If Pennsylvania's taxpayers are going to provide its libraries with the ability to access the Internet, then Pennsylvania's taxpayers are going to have some say about how the Internet is used.

Thank you.