

GUEST COLUMN

A child's education must include lessons in proper Internet use

By Roger Rogalin and Jim Teicher

Among its many provisions, the Bush administration's "Leave No Child Behind Act" increases funds for Character Education, including lessons and activities aimed at character-building and conflict resolution that have proven over time to improve school safety and make schools a more conducive environment for learning.

But while the learning environment of schools has extended beyond actual physical space into cyberspace, school

safety prevention programs have not.

By extending programs designed to promote ethical behavior and civic-mindedness to cyberspace, America's K-12 schools can teach children to master computer technology securely and to navigate the Internet responsibly, skills sets that are a sine qua non for citizenship in 21st Century society.

The U.S. Department of Education reports that 98 percent of all public schools are connected to the Internet. According to Market Data Retrieval, an education-research firm, the

majority of teachers use computers and the Internet on a daily basis for both planning and instructional purposes. Schools, however, are just now coming to grips with the urgent need to teach cyber-citizenship and effective Internet use as a "meta-curriculum."

Just as a teacher or parent would never leave a young child unattended at, for instance, a public park, teachers and parents must not allow a youngster to go online without the presence of a trusted adult. Such a presence is especially needed because there is no such thing

as an infallible Internet filtering technology to block access to inappropriate Web sites.

The cloak of anonymity provided by cyberspace poses additional challenges for children. Young people must understand that all cyberpals — others they meet online — are strangers. Students in their formative years must have the rules of online safety drilled home until they are as thoroughly internalized as the classic "never take candy from a stranger."

Children also need to internalize a whole slew of technological rights and wrongs. For

example, stealing or harming information stored in computers or on Web sites is both morally and legally wrong. Pasting and copying proprietary information from online sources is as much an act of plagiarism as copying from bound books. Not only must students realize that downloading copyright-protected files, including music, is illegal, but they have to be challenged to imagine how they would feel if their intellectual property and livelihood were pirated.

With so much riding on technology, students must be taught

to use responsibly the vast information-sharing and communication capabilities that only computers and the Internet can provide.

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