Staying informed about legislative issues regarding student online access is important for school librarians. We need to advocate for regulations and laws that support education of young people rather than simply limiting their access to the Web.

"Tag! You're it!"

PLAYING ON THE DIGITAL PLAYGROUND

Dianne de Las Casas

When I was a child, I socialized at the playground. "Tag! You're it!" a boy would scream, and children dispersed like ants fleeing from bug spray, trying to find the most surreptitious hiding spots. We played jacks, marbles, jump rope, dodgeball, and other outdoor games. Today's generation of children is different. They are more likely to spend their leisure time using technology. My twelve-year-old nephew invites

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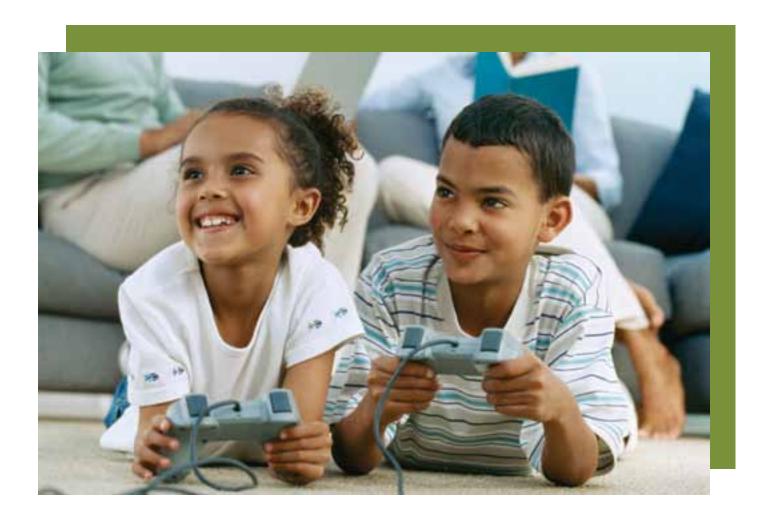
friends over to play his Xbox. My nieces play collaborative games on their Nintendo DSi devices, competing against each other in the same game but on separate devices. My ten-year-old daughter loves playing Words with Friends on her iPod Touch. These are just examples from my family. Today's youth are growing up using technology. They embrace it, and technology has become an inherent part of their daily lives.

This comfort with technology leads children into new territories, allowing them to be creative and test new boundaries. Eliana, my ten-year-old daughter, has a passion for cooking. Using the Web, she has tapped

into this talent by creating cooking videos for kids. She has a Facebook fan page, a YouTube account, and a website <www.elianacooks.com>. As a family, it has become a fun way for us to work together. I serve as props manager and director, and her twenty-year-old sister, Soleil, is videographer and editor. After a video is edited, Soleil uploads it to YouTube. Eliana then embeds the video on her website, along with the recipe. It is a lesson in collaboration, mastering technology, and intellectual freedom. The experience has been very empowering for Eliana, allowing her to explore new horizons and challenge herself.

But, as Peter Parker's uncle said in the movie *Spiderman*, "With great power comes great responsibility." As a parent, I have to draw the

line between what is fun and empowering, and what is safe for my daughter. Of course, I have access to all her online accounts and monitor her activity. She is, after all, only ten years old, and that is my responsibility as a parent.

For schools, this job of monitoring activity is not as easy. Online access for students is governed not only by district policy but also by federal and state laws. The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) makes qualifying for certain federal funding contingent on public schools' using filtering software to block a minor's access to pornographic material.

In this digital era of Web 2.0, schools are expected to give students the necessary skills to navigate technology, while at the same time protecting them from the dangers of online predators and inappropriate content. What has often ensued is a battle over online access. Many schools have blocked access to interactive Web technologies and sites such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Skype, as well as podcasts and blogs.

I am not an advocate of the "one size fits all" policy with regard to our youth's access to technology. Consider instituting a differentiated policy approach for students in elementary, middle school, and high school to address their varied developmental needs. Students can learn so much using available online tools.

Paula Naugle, a fourth-grade teacher at Bissonet Plaza Elementary in Metairie, Louisiana, uses technology inside the classroom on a regular basis. "I use Skype often to connect to other classes around the country. My students have been interviewed by students in New York about their Hurricane Katrina experiences. They have compared our state capitol building to North Carolina's and compared our state symbols to those of Massachusetts, Virginia, and Alabama. We have a 'buddy' class in Kansas that we Skype with often. We have done several chorale readings together via Skype and planned several online collaborative projects with them."
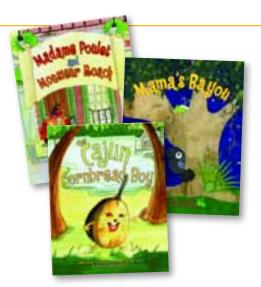
Staying informed about legislative issues regarding student online

access is important for school librarians. We need to advocate for regulations and laws that support education of young people rather than simply limiting their access to the Web. Intellectual freedom online will continue to be a hot-button issue, but as burgeoning technologies invite more interactivity, students will not only be curious risk takers, they will likely be the ones leading the technology revolution. Facebook was, after all, created by a nineteen-year-old!

As a children's book author and storyteller who does extensive school visits, I have developed internal policies with regard to students' online access to me. It is important for me to connect with my young fans, but I also want to ensure their safety as well as limit my liability. I often receive Facebook friend requests from students. While I don't "friend" children, I do encourage them to become "fans" on my Facebook fan page, which is dedicated to my professional life. My website has a number of places that invite children: book activities, kids' connection, the story collection, and my blog.

I am a big proponent of allowing students to *explore, create, imagine, connect* and *celebrate* the vast world around them, both on and offline. The Web is a treasure trove of resources, and social media have changed the way the world communicates. It is now possible for children to connect and interact with students from around the world, share their ideas via a blog, create a wiki on an interesting subject, record a Web radio show or podcast, upload a self-created video, and post opinions on topics that matter to them. We have the opportunity to bridge the global gap through technology.

Most people would not shut down an entire playground on the basis that children *might* get hurt. Let's use the same idea with technology and the Web. Allow students to go online, but be there to monitor them. Teach them safe practices. The Web is a great way for students to explore their own intellectual freedom. It can be a gateway to lessons in language arts, history, social studies, math, science, and art. The World Wide Web can be fun AND educational. So let's meet on the digital playground..."Tag! You're it!"

Dianne de Las Casas is a critically acclaimed author, award-winning storyteller, and recording artist. She performs at schools, libraries, festivals, and special events, and is a frequent speaker at national and state library and education conferences. She is the author of The Cajun Cornbread Boy, Madame Poulet and Monsieur Roach, *and* Mama's Bayou, *all published by Pelican. De Las Casas lives with her family in Harvey, Louisiana.*