

Senator Eric Schmitt

Weekly Column

15th District



Week of May 5, 2009

More information
from the Capitol



Protecting Children from Internet Predators

Most households have a computer and internet access because it has become almost a necessity for work and school. However, the very thing that is making our lives easier can also be a dangerous tool for criminals. I am working to make sure state agencies have the resources they need to combat this problem, as well as supporting the work of local groups taking steps to protect children in our community from internet predators.

When three mothers in Kirkwood noticed that “open chat” sites geared toward children were being subject to attempts to evade filters, resulting in inappropriate material being available to their children, they decided to take action. Working with state and local organizations, these three women have made a significant difference in the safety of the children in our community, and I am proud to be included in some of their work to protect children from online predators. Lauren Ross, Nicole Hatfield, and Diane Constant are the founders of CyberSafeNation. Their work has led to significant changes, including leading the Build-a-Bear website to actually take down its open chat completely. The

Visitors to the Capitol



Sen. Schmitt with Debra Hollingsworth during the Senate Gubernatorial Appointments Committee hearing. She

*was appointed to the Harris-Stowe
University Board of Regents.*

To see their photos and others who
have visited the capitol, click [here](#).

group also petitioned our local school superintendents to make sure open chat websites are blocked in schools in St. Louis County. Their efforts were recently recognized with a national internet safety award.

In order to support the work of parents and educators, such as the Kirkwood residents involved in CyberSafeNation, local law enforcement works hard to catch internet predators and bring these individuals to justice. One of the challenges in dealing with cyber crime is the fact that it is ever-changing and completely technology-based. It is important that our local law enforcement has the equipment and manpower necessary to bring down these criminals. This is the reason for the Internet Cyber Crime Grant Program in our state, which distributes funding to support a broad range of activities to prevent and control internet cyber crime as it relates to children and to improve public safety. This includes help to fund added staff and equipment for departments working to find and prosecute internet predators. The fiscal year 2010 budget, which goes into effect on July 1, 2009, contains \$1 million in grants for the state's regional cyber crime-fighting units.

Protecting our children from internet crimes also includes recognizing the damage that can be done by cyber bullying. As technology has advanced, so have the ways that some students are picked on, teased, and harassed. Take the tragic example of the St. Charles teenager who was taunted on an online social networking site, ultimately leading to her suicide. A measure making its way through the legislative process in several bills would change the definition of "bullying" as used in anti-bullying policies in school districts to include cyber-bullying and electronic communications. This

gives our schools the tools to protect our children from bullies, both online and in the halls.

The work of local law enforcement, the Legislature, and concerned non-profit organizations is making an impact on this dangerous problem, but work must continue. Lt. Governor Peter Kinder recently expressed interest in working with CyberSafeNation to advance internet safety measures and make sure parents are aware of online dangers. For some tips on how to keep your children safe, visit <http://www.icacmo.org/>, the home of the Missouri Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, managed by the Glendale Police Department.

Also in the Legislature...

Two pieces of my priority legislation passed this week:

- Senate Joint Resolution 5 is a constitutional amendment that, if approved by voters, would require the assessor in St. Louis County to be elected, rather than appointed. I sponsored this legislation because having an elected assessor attacks the problem of unfair assessments on the front end, ensuring the assessment process is more open, transparent and fair. The assessor's only job should be to fairly assess property and for those values to fairly reflect market conditions. The measure is expected to appear on the November 2010 ballot.
- Senate Bill 157 codifies the five regional autism projects (Central, East, Northwest, Southeast, and Southwest Missouri) that collectively provide Autism Spectrum Disorder services to approximately 2,500

families statewide. The first project was established in 1991 as a result of families in rural Missouri approaching legislators to ask for autism-specific family support. Services provided by the projects include assessment, advocacy training, therapy, and parent or caregiver training. The legislation specifies that each project would have a regional parent advisory council and that the division would establish the Missouri Parent Advisory Committee on Autism. This legislation ensures that the programs and services that will help better the quality of life for those on the Autism Spectrum reach those who need them. With the governor's approval, the bill will go into effect on August 28th this year.



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