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Camdenton Parents React to Lawsuit Over Blocked Homosexuality Websites at Schools

The Camdenton School Board heard from the public at a packed meeting Tuesday night. At issue is the ACLU's lawsuit against the district over gay, lesbian, and transgender informational websites the district's software blocks.

August 31, 2011 | Joanna Small and Joel Girdner | Reporter and Photographer

CAMDENTON, Mo. — In a story you'll see only on KSPR, the American Civil Liberties Union says an Ozarks school district is the only one in the country that has refused to comply with a national campaign against censorship.

The Camdenton School Board met Tuesday to discuss the ACLU's federal lawsuit over its internet filter.

The ACLU claims Camdenton is blocking gay, lesbian and transgender informational websites, but allowing access to sites that condemn homosexuality. Tuesday the district talked to its attorneys; then parents talked to the district.

"This is really a small issue, but it's such a huge one."

So huge parents lined up outside the Camdenton schools administration building, inside the lobby, and in a conference room downstairs while the school board met behind closed doors to discuss the "small issue" that's landed it in a federal lawsuit.

"We want to protect the constitutional rights of our students and at the same time also protect our students from inappropriate material on the internet."

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But Superintendent Tim Hadfield would not say whether that material includes websites about homosexuality. The district's software blocks some. The ACLU is suing over viewpoint discrimination, calling legal action a last resort.

"I certainly don't think it was intentional in the beginning but we wrote to them and they refused to change how they do business, so I think it's intentional now," says Tony Rochert with the ACLU of Eastern Missouri's legal department.

When the doors finally opened to the public the vast majority of people at Tuesday's meeting applauded that.

"It's mind-boggling," says one woman. "If this is something the child wants to get into they should really talk to their parents," she continues.

"We're willing to put up the dollars to stand up against them coming in and trying to put our kids what I'd call harm's way," seconds another.

"The school needs to filter these sex sites," a parent says.

"Trevor Project, It Gets Better Project, Human Rights Campaign, PFLAG, Matthew Shepard Foundation, No H8 Campaign," reads Juan and Christina Price.

They are the lone minority in attendance and say those are not sex sites, but they are blocked inside Camdenton schools.



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"They're charities. Non-profits, mostly started by mothers who lost someone," the couple, who has a daughter in the district, explains.

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Both sides are begging the district-- "do the right thing."

But "the right thing" is subjective.

Tuesday night the district made some additions to its internet policy, meaning put on paper procedures already in place such as how students can request access to blocked sites.

The superintendent says no student approached staff about wanting access to any of the blocked sites at issue in this suit.

The ACLU has filed a preliminary injunction to get the blocks on the sites in question removed. The school district has until Thursday to file a response. No action will be taken before then.

Camdenton is getting some national attention because of this; the Washington Post published a story about the issue recently.

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