

November 17, 2023

The Honorable Maria Cantwell, Chair
Senate Committee on Commerce, Science,
and Transportation
511 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC
20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer,
Senate Majority Leader
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC
20510

Dear Leader Schumer and Chair Cantwell:

Last month, a group of Republicans led by Sen. Ted Cruz introduced the Eyes on the Board Act.¹ The bill, which would strip away E-Rate funding from schools and libraries unless they block access to social media sites, represents an escalation in the ongoing assault on libraries and teens' access to information across the country. **For children in low-income communities who depend on subsidized internet access and social media for education and connection, this bill amounts to a digital book ban.** The undersigned organizations strongly oppose this bill and urge you to not allow it to move forward.

The Eyes on the Board Act would mark the next step in Republicans' continuing assault on libraries. In the last year, Republicans across the country have unleashed a campaign to cut off children's access to information, most often in pursuit of a conservative agenda. A recent study by PEN America found that in the first half of the 2022-2023 school year, there has been a 28% increase in the number of individual titles banned in school libraries. The same analysis found that, "overwhelmingly, book banners [...] target stories by and about people of color and LGBTQ+ individuals."²

The far-right's war on teen access to information has also expanded to target access to online resources, compounding the impact of censorship laws banning printed titles and classroom materials. Over the past year, Utah, Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana all passed a set of digital teen censorship laws restricting access to online resources for minors – all with the support of the same anti-LGBTQ groups and lawmakers supporting book bans in those states.³

By targeting recipients of E-Rate funds, this bill would penalize communities that are already struggling to provide high-quality education. The bill would require schools

¹<https://www.commerce.senate.gov/services/files/DDDB88D2-D04A-439B-B58B-5ADD84B20053>

²<https://pen.org/report/banned-in-the-usa-state-laws-supercharge-book-suppression-in-schools/>

³<https://progresschamber.org/new-report-digital-censorship-laws-closely-tied-to-book-bans-school-censorship/>

and libraries to block access to social media sites on their networks in order to be eligible for E-Rate program funds. The E-Rate program subsidizes internet services for schools and libraries in districts with high rates of poverty.⁴ In the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, around 15 million students lacked internet access at home.⁵ Students without internet at home are more likely to be Black or Native American, and more likely to be low-income.⁶ For these students, the E-Rate program is a lifeline, giving them access to a 21st century education.

There are many legitimate reasons children would need to access social media in school. Today's students use social media for research and to communicate with classmates. Especially during the pandemic, schools incorporated social media tools to keep classmates connected and encourage collaboration. Students use social media to connect on group projects, share materials from class, and watch educational videos and online tutors.

Platforms that many lawmakers today think of purely as social media also offer access to a wide range of informational resources. Nearly 40 percent of Gen Z members use TikTok as a search engine.⁷ First-generation college students looking for scholarships, advice for applications, and researching university options can often get better information from a broader set of stakeholders on social media than they can in person. In cutting off access to social media as an educational resource, the bill risks further entrenching the opportunity divide for low-income and minority students.

Outside of educational uses, social media is more important than ever for children to access information and find supportive communities. Fewer than 40% of LGBTQ+ teens report that their homes are affirming, so many turn to social media for affirmation and support they cannot get offline.⁸ Older teens looking for accurate information on reproductive or sexual health services, including abortion access or rape crisis centers, can use social media to find health centers or connect with experts. For children who do not have internet access at home, being able to access these networks at a school or library is especially important. In addition to their efforts to censor books and school libraries, this bill would represent another step in Republicans' battle to strip away health care and attack LGBTQ+ communities.

⁴<https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/universal-service-program-schools-and-libraries-e-rate>

⁵<https://www.edweek.org/technology/fewer-districts-are-providing-home-internet-access-but-students-still-need-it/2022/09>

⁶<https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=46#:~:text=Internet%20Access%20from%20Home,smartphone%20for%20home%20internet%20access.>

⁷<https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/gen-bypassing-google-tiktok-search-engine/story?id=88493981>

⁸<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2023/>

The Eyes on the Board Act would threaten to take away a lifeline for students and school districts that are already struggling. We urge you to block this escalation of Republicans' book ban crusade and protect children's rights to education and information.

Sincerely,

Chamber of Progress
Fight for the Future
LGBT Tech