



BUYER'S GUIDE

How to Evaluate and Select the Right School Web Filter

A Buyer's Guide for K-12 Technology Teams

Table of Contents

- 3** Introduction
- 4** 3 Types of Web Filter and the Pros and Cons of Each
- 8** What to Consider When Evaluating a School Web Filter
- 14** 5 Steps to Take When Choosing a School Web Filter
- 16** Vendor Evaluation Checklist
- 17** Deliver a Safer, More Educational Web



Introduction

All school web filters perform the same essential function: ensuring your students have access to the educational content they need on the internet while protecting them from distracting, inappropriate, or harmful content like pornography and gambling sites.

But not all school web filters are created equal.

Some web filters offer little beyond checking the box on Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) compliance. Others are overly complex and require you to pay for enterprise features you don't need. They may also require complicated workarounds to address the unique needs of K-12 education.

With so many different solutions on the market, it can be tempting to implement just any web filter and move on to bigger challenges. But the school web filter you choose can make your students safer and your job a little easier. Keep reading to learn:

- Three main types of web filter—and the advantages and disadvantages of each
- 13 questions to ask when evaluating a school web filter
- The five-step process to ensure you make the right choice

3 Types of Web Filter and the Pros and Cons of Each

There is no shortage of web filters available on the market. This can make choosing a web filter for your district or school feel like an overwhelming task. But it doesn't need to be. There are only three main types of web filter. Understanding the pros and cons of each will help you determine which is best for your needs and will help you narrow down the choices.

[Free Web Filters](#)

[Appliance Filters](#)

[Cloud Web Filters](#)





Free Web Filters

To make filtering accessible to all schools, many software providers offer free versions of their paid web filter. A free filter meets CIPA compliance, but has limited features.

Pros

- No upfront or operating costs

Cons

- Are usually bare-bones DNS-based filters with few features
- Often designed for consumer use, rarely designed for education
- Difficult to deploy
- Only cover devices on the school network
- Not compatible with all operating systems
- Offer limited or no reporting options



Appliance Filters

A web filter appliance is a physical on-premises hardware device. It was the only commercially available option when web filters were first introduced.

Pros

- Data is housed locally
- Provides local control

Cons

- High upfront costs
- Requires IT resources to manage, maintain, and keep operating smoothly
- Designed to meet the needs of businesses, not K-12 schools
- Only protects devices when at school, and authentication becomes impossible if the appliance is unavailable or overloaded
- MITM SSL decryption processing is done on the appliance, which can affect network performance
- May not work properly with all devices and operating systems
- Performance is tied to the appliance's capabilities, so spikes in traffic can cause issues
- Need to be replaced or upgraded every few years to address obsolescence
- No redundancy. A single point of failure means that if one thing goes wrong, it all goes wrong

Appliance web filters are still in use, but they can present challenges.

[Read the article to learn why](#)



Cloud Web Filters

Cloud-based filters operate by proxying (redirecting) your school devices' web traffic through the web-filtering provider's server clusters. This filtering choice can be among the easiest to set up, often being as simple as pointing your school's traffic to a new DNS.

Pros

- Low upfront cost
- Easy to implement
- Scalable to meet increases in network demand (for example, if your school implements a 1:1 device program)
- Can be managed from anywhere, whether onsite or remotely
- Students are safe from the moment their device is turned on
- Protect student devices anywhere, not just on the network
- Flexible to accommodate spikes in traffic with no slowdown or latency delay
- Typically compatible with most devices and operating systems

Cons

- Ongoing operational cost

Dig deeper into the differences between a cloud-based web filter and a filter appliance.

[Read the ebook](#)



What to Consider When Evaluating a School Web Filter

Ask the following questions of potential vendors to ensure you choose the right web filter for your needs. Even if you already have a web filter, the answers to these questions might reveal challenges with your current filter that are worth solving.

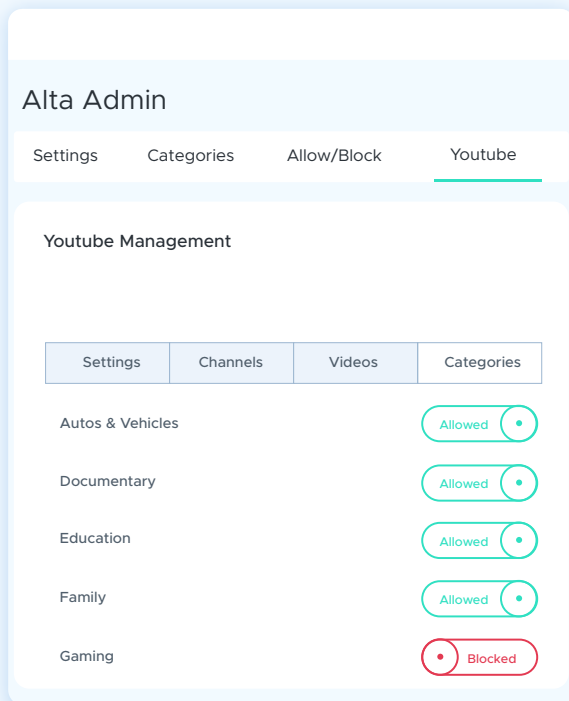
1. Is the web filter designed specifically for K-12 schools?

Web filtering isn't used only in schools. Many organizations and businesses use web filters. There are even web filters for home usage. While general purpose web filtering solutions can be applied in educational settings, they aren't designed for your unique requirements. As a result, they often require schools to sacrifice key capabilities or undertake complicated workarounds. For example, if you have after-school e-sports clubs, some filters offer time-based policies that allow certain sites to be unblocked at specific times of day. It's worth prioritizing a web filter provider that specializes in serving K-12 schools so you get the features, functionality, and flexibility you need in a web filtering solution.

2. Does it block all content that's potentially harmful and distracting?

A web filter should be able to block more than just the obvious content like pornography. If it can also block sites that present a range of potentially harmful and distracting content, it will be more effective at keeping your students safe, as well as helping them stay focused on schoolwork. You want a web filter that's customizable to block a variety of potentially harmful sites, including those that:

- Contain graphic violence, cruelty, or gambling
- Promote hate speech or discrimination
- Endorse self-harm or suicidal ideation
- Promote the use of drugs or sale of drug paraphernalia
- Distract students from learning, like TikTok and some YouTube content



3. Does the web filter support granular control of sites like YouTube?

Some web filters offer only simple blocking or allowing of sites. Their lack of flexibility makes you have to choose between either blocking sites entirely or not at all. This is fine for some sites, which are blatantly harmful or inappropriate to students. But other sites aren't so cut and dried. YouTube is a perfect example. While there are plenty of distracting videos on YouTube, it also offers a lot of educational content that your teachers want to use in their lessons. You want a school web filter that gives you granular control over block/allow settings for a site like YouTube so you aren't forced to make a one-size-fits-all decision.

Some filters provide extensive YouTube controls, even for Azure/Microsoft schools.

[Watch this video to learn more](#)

4. Does it offer customizable policies to address all of our user needs?

You want your web filter to be flexible enough to support a range of students and staff, each with their own needs. A web filter that gives you a range of customization options will make it easy for you to:

- Create multiple groups, each with different levels of access
- Create groups without needing to modify your existing OU structure
- Customize allowed or blocked content for each group
- Use a single interface to create and manage all groups
- Apply granular controls to allow or block content
- Allow time-based access to normally restricted sites (such as video-gaming sites) for clubs and other groups that meet after school



5. How fault-tolerant is the web filter?

When you're responsible for your district's or school's technology, you're under a lot of pressure to keep your systems up and running. Your ability to minimize and mitigate the risk of system downtime can mean the difference between working on a network issue into the wee hours and going home from work on time. Not all web filters come with the same fault tolerance. When your filter physically resides between your network and the Internet, it's impacted by all of the issues those two systems might encounter and vice versa. To ensure maximum uptime and minimal headaches, prioritize choosing a web filter that offers built-in redundancy, like a cloud-based web filter, instead of a single point of failure, like an appliance filter.

6. How does the web filter handle new websites?

An estimated 252,000 new websites are created each day. If your web filter is relying on outdated blocking lists or you missed an update, your students stand the risk of being exposed to hundreds of sites that contain harmful or dangerous content. When evaluating a web filter, do your research or ask the provider how they manage new sites. A web filter that's capable of scanning and auto-blocking new and potentially dangerous sites in real-time will help you stay ahead of new and evolving threats, from pornography sites to TikTok challenges.

7. Is deployment and setup easy?

As an IT professional, you have no shortage of things on your plate. Students and teachers depend on your expertise and responsiveness to make sure their class time is utilized effectively. That means you don't have time to waste when it comes to deploying and managing your web filter. Ask the filter provider what implementation will look like. Here's what to look for to make deployment (and your job) a whole lot easier:

- Minimal hardware installation or software configuration
- Fast and hassle-free set up, even if you have thousands of devices
- A responsive support team that can assist with the deployment process, or even do it for you

8. Does the filter support management delegation?

Managing your network is a big responsibility, and web filtering is a sizable part of that. Teachers and administrators have their own needs for management and reporting that all come through IT. When your web filter allows you to delegate access and send reports to the right people automatically, your job becomes much easier.

9. How does the filter provider address student privacy and data security?

When choosing a web filter, you need to also evaluate the filter provider's stance on student privacy and their data security protocols. Ensure the provider:

- Adheres to strict policies around data usage and collection
- Maintains compliance with all state, federal, and international data privacy regulations
- Meets the most stringent methods for data collection and storage
- Controls the collection of sensitive content and restricts access to only those who need it
- Relies on artificial intelligence (AI) to analyze data instead of human reviewers

For the ultimate peace of mind that your data is protected against risks and threats, you can choose a filter provider that:

- Uses AES 256-bit encryption to safeguard restricted and confidential data
- Has achieved SOC2 Type 2 compliance for its technology (and isn't just relying on the compliance of its data centers)
- Provides automatic recall and quarantining of sensitive data, such as images containing nudity



10. Can it filter all student devices and operating systems on your network?

Your web filter needs to cover any devices and operating systems your students use. If you use iOS student devices, you'll want to probe the filter provider specifically about their ability to address common iOS filtering challenges. For example, the ability to support user-level reporting on iOS devices with no login requirements is particularly helpful when you have younger students working on iPads.

Regardless of your particular technology program, you'll want to have a thorough understanding of a filter provider's device support capabilities. Here are some additional questions to uncover a filter provider's ability to address your specific requirements:

- Does the filter cover all the operating systems used by student devices?
- How does the filter handle authentication and reporting for shared devices?
- Does it provide a seamless user experience, regardless of the device?
- If your school allows students to use their own devices, does the filter support BYOD devices?
- How does the filter handle guest networks or persons who don't have credentials?
- How does it address staff devices?

11. Can the web filter work on all student devices, even when they're off the network?

Many students take school-issued devices home, so you need a filter that travels with them. Even if you don't send devices home, if your filtering doesn't work when a student device is off network, students will quickly learn that setting up a wi-fi hotspot on their phone will let them get around the filter. Bottom line: whether you have a take-home device policy today or not, your filter's ability to filter devices whether on or off the network is a capability worth considering.



12. Does the filter integrate with student wellness monitoring?

Student wellness monitoring software is playing an increasingly important role in schools. As districts and schools prioritize student mental health and wellness, this software helps your student safety and wellness teams identify students who may be contemplating or experiencing self-harm, suicide, violence, and bullying. When your web filter is integrated with your student wellness monitoring solution, you're able to give your school counselors additional context into a student's online activities. This context helps them thoroughly investigate at-risk students and intervene early—before a bad situation gets worse.

Interested in learning more about student wellness monitoring?

[Read the article](#)

13. Does the web filter offer parental controls?

As their kids spend more and more time on devices, the adults in charge of their safety are looking for ways to protect them from inappropriate content and bad faith actors. It's safe to say that most if not all parents and caregivers are curious—if not outright concerned—about their children's online activities. They're eager for help with managing screen time and setting healthy limits. A filter provider that also offers an app for parents and caregivers lets you extend these capabilities to your community and share the responsibility for keeping students safe.

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“Filter gives us peace of mind, especially when students have devices at home. Not only are we following our legal responsibilities and protecting students, but we are also opening up access and educational opportunities.”

Michael Nikson

Instructional Technology Coordinator
School District of Sheboygan Falls

5 Steps to Take When Choosing a School Web Filter

With more clarity about your own web filtering requirements, you're ready to survey the field of potential vendors. This simple five-step process can help to inform your evaluation and decision-making process.

Step 1

Identify vendors for consideration

Begin the evaluation process by researching web filters designed specifically for K-12 education. By limiting your search to providers that are focused solely on supporting K-12 schools, you'll narrow your choices to those solutions that are best equipped to provide the features and integrations you need.

Step 2

Evaluate a shortlist of vendors

Once you've identified your top three to five vendors, prepare a requirements document or use the Filter Evaluation Checklist we've provided at the end of this guide. Ask each vendor to respond to your requirements in a proposal and provide any relevant support materials to substantiate their benefits and features, and their ability to meet your needs. Also, provide them with a clear deadline to respond in order to keep your process moving.

Step 3

Test drive the solution

Take a good look under the hood of any web filter that you're evaluating. Vendors often offer a free trial or demo to allow you to try the filter for yourself. This is the perfect opportunity for you to thoroughly test features and refine your requirements. Be sure to make a note of additional questions you may have. A trial or demo is your opportunity to voice any concerns, as well as gauge the filter provider's ability and willingness to support you during deployment and beyond.



Step 4

Rate each vendor

Once you've evaluated vendors thoroughly, you may find it helpful to use a rating system to make your final decision. Using the Filter Evaluation Checklist, add a column for each vendor. Then rate each one on their ability to meet each requirement, using a simple point-based approach as follows:

0 = Does not meet requirement

1 = Limited support for requirement

2 = Somewhat supports requirement

3 = Meets or exceeds requirement

Step 5


Finalize your decision

Tally up each provider's score and see who comes out on top. Using this quantitative and objective method will ensure you've compared providers fairly and consistently to arrive at the best fit for your district or school. Once you've identified the best solution, work with your chosen vendor to finalize the details and plan the implementation.

Vendor Evaluation Checklist

Use this list of requirements to evaluate your shortlist of school web filter providers, adding any additional requirements of your own in the spaces provided. Rate each vendor using the following rating scale:

- 0** = Does not meet requirement
- 1** = Limited support for requirement
- 2** = Somewhat supports requirement
- 3** = Meets or exceeds requirement

| Requirements |  securly | Vendor 2 | Vendor 3 |
|---|---|----------|----------|
| Designed specifically for K-12 education | | | |
| Blocks harmful or distracting content | | | |
| Provides granular controls | | | |
| Offers extensive customization | | | |
| Is fault tolerant | | | |
| Effectively handles new websites | | | |
| Easy setup and deployment | | | |
| Supports management delegation | | | |
| Prioritizes privacy and security | | | |
| Supports all student devices | | | |
| Supports student devices off the network | | | |
| Integrates with student wellness monitoring | | | |
| Offers parental controls | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| Total | | | |

Deliver a Safer, More Educational Web

Keeping students safe is essential to their development and learning. The technology decisions you make are the key to giving your students access to the educational tools they need, while ensuring their safety by protecting them from harmful and potentially dangerous online content.

When it comes to choosing the best web filter for you and your students, you have options. Not all web filters are created equally, though. By choosing a cloud-based web filter that's designed specifically for the requirements of K-12 schools, you can:

- Ensure CIPA compliance, without having to maintain an appliance or figure out complicated workarounds
- Get all of the filtering features you need to make your job easier
- Gain visibility and control over all devices regardless of location
- Manage your web filter from anywhere
- Be up and running with your new filter in minutes



Ready to take the next step?

Securly Filter is a cloud web filter designed solely for K-12 schools. Offering easy setup, the highest-rated support, and unparalleled flexibility, Securly Filter streamlines and simplifies web filtering for busy school IT teams.

Learn more about how Securly Filter helps you keep your students safe on all devices, whether at school, home, or anywhere in between.

[Visit the website](#)[Get the brief](#)

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“We chose Securly Filter to provide an appliance-less, scalable, and CIPA-compliant solution to protect our students. I’m not sure where we would be without Securly in our district. It has become part of our culture and provides us the additional support we need.”

Tom Walker

Director of Technology
Massac Unit School District #1



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always protected.

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