Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying has emerged as one of the fastest growing issues faced by school leaders. It involves the use of technology to bully another person and can occur through the use of e-mail, instant messaging or texting, blogs, postings on websites, or through social media.

Today's teens are very comfortable with technology. They use the Internet, cell phones, and text messaging to stay connected to friends and access to technology is available at school, home, coffee shops, stores and friends' homes. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart, 2010) more than 75% of 12-17 year olds own cell phones. Seventy-two percent, or 88% of cell phone users, send text messages.

What is Cyberbullying?

The most common definition of cyberbullying is that it includes repeated, unwanted aggressive behavior over a period of time. The National Crime Prevention Council defines cyber-bullying as when "the Internet, cell phones or other devices are used to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person." StopCyberbullying.org, an organization dedicated to internet safety, defines cyber bullying as: "a situation where a child, tween or teen is repeatedly 'tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed or otherwise targeted' by another child, tween or teen using text messaging, email, instant messaging or any other type of digital technology." Online harassment can have long-term implications for students because of the ability to forward the message, thus perpetuating the harassment.

Who Cyberbullies?

A recent report from Common Sense Media (2010) (www.commonsense.org) reported that 29% of 10-17 year-olds said they had been cyberbullied and 52% said they know someone who has been cyberbullied. A poll conducted by the National Crime Prevention Council (2010) found that 11% of students between 10-17 years of age admitted to engaging in some type of cyberbullying. While both genders engage in cyberbullying, girls are more likely to be both perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying. The study found that boys are more likely to engage in traditional forms of bullying. Another report found no major differences in socio-economic status, race or ethnicity or parent education among those being harassed or doing the harassing (Lenhart, 2007).

What to Consider When Dealing with Cyberbullying

First, determine where the speech occurred. If it was on-campus the school can regulate it. If it was off-campus you need to determine whether it caused a substantial disruption. In either case, you need to document the impact in case your decision is reviewed.

Second, review your school's policies including those included in the student handbook or student code of conduct. Be sure that these policies are clear about what constitutes cyberbullying and what the penalties may be. Also state that activities that occur off-campus but cause a substantial disruption in school will be subject to school discipline.

Third, recognize that courts have voided school policies that regulated speech that was just unpleasant, insulting or offensive

Resources

Selected print and online resources about this topic are available on page 3.

What Schools Should Do – The Educational Response
Every set of recommendations for dealing with cyberbullying suggests a clear policy about what constitutes bullying and how school staff will respond. They also encourage schools to focus on educating students and their families about responsible use of the Internet and other digital media and to adopt practices to that focus on stopping the harassment.

Several steps for dealing with the use of social media, used to cyberbully, have been identified.
- First, develop a clear policy with a focus on educationally valuable use of the Internet. Effective policies are supported by curriculum and professional development. Teachers should be expected to have students use the Internet only for high quality, well-planned instructional activities.
- Second, implement a comprehensive program to educate students and their families about online safety and responsible use.
- Third, develop a plan to monitor Internet use at school.
- Fourth, have appropriate consequences for inappropriate use of the Internet or social networking sites. Include administrators, school counselors, school psychologists, and school resource officers in developing an monitoring the plan.
- Fifth, engage families in monitoring Internet use. Since most use occurs outside of school hours it is critical that parents understand the importance of monitoring their children's online activities and how they should respond when inappropriate use takes place.

What Schools Can Do – Legal Considerations
While cyberbullying is a growing problem it often occurs off campus and outside of school hours, limiting what principals can do.

The dilemma with cyberbullying is that while it may begin off campus it can easily cause problems at school. When it does, principals can act based on the disruption that occurs to the school's program. But, based on the decision of the US Supreme Court in *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969) you can only act when student speech causes a substantial disruption to school activities. Administrators may not restrict speech merely because they disagree with it or find it offensive. If the speech is a clear threat to school safety or to a conducive learning environment you may be able to act and discipline the student.

If cyberbullying occurs on campus principals can discipline students. For example, if students use school computers or their own cell phones or computers on school grounds then they are subject to school discipline. But most students access websites and social networking sites for cyberbullying while off the school campus.

A frequently cited case (*Layshock v. Hermitage School District*, 2007) dealt with a student who created a parody of the principal on a social networking website. The parody was created on a home computer and was not part of any school activity. A federal district court ruled in favor of the student and that school officials had violated the student's rights when they disciplined him for off-campus speech.

Schools should have clear, explicit policies about cyberbullying. They should be clear about the disciplinary action that will occur when cyberbullying occurs and should include information about how students and teachers should report cyberbullying. Finally, the policy should state that a student can be disciplined for off-campus speech if it causes a substantial disruption to the school's operations.

Summary
Cyberbullying is a growing problem. Because much of the bullying occurs off-campus schools are limited in how they can respond. It is recommended that schools review and clarify policies on bullying to be sure they explicitly include cyberbullying and that schools work with students and their families to promote responsible use of digital technology.

Resources

Stop Cyberbullying Website
(http://www.stopcyberbullying.org)
Check out this site and look at some of the resources available for schools. You can make selections based on the age group in your school (7-10, 11-13, 14-17). The site also describes different kinds of cyberbullies. (http://tinyurl.com/2vd5u9).

Center for Education Policy and Law, University of San Diego
(http://www.sandiego.edu/soles/centers/cepal/recent_studies/ecd_project/index.php)
 The center provides sample policies that you can use to guide revising your school's policies on digital issues.

Center for Disease Control and Prevention
(http://www.cdc.gov)
This site has numerous resources including recommendations about educating students and families about digital technology (http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/EA-brief-a.pdf).

Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use
(http://www.cyberbully.org/cyberbully)
The site offers information and resources for educators about cyber issues including cyberbullying and sexting.

Internet Solutions for Kids - Cyberbully 411
(http://www.cyberbully411.com)
This site provides resources for youth who have been the target of online harassment. Created by Internet Solutions for Kinds, Inc. with funding from the Community Technology Foundation of California.

Pew Internet and American Life Project
(http://www.pewinternet.org)
This site provides information about many different social media issues including one of the most recent reports on cyberbullying (http://www.pewinternet.org/Presentations/2010/May/Cyberbullying-2010.aspx).

E P I: Developing successful, long-lasting business and education partnerships with a positive impact on America's youth.

www.educationpartnerships.org

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http://www.educationpartnerships.org