Addressing CyberBullying in Our Schools

The digital environment increasingly provides a window into face to face (F2F) as well as virtual interactions between people. Bullying, which sadly seems to be a timeless activity, has moved into virtual environments as more students have gained access to and knowledge about the Internet. While some educational leaders may prefer to metaphorically "paint over" these windows in schools to hide these negative interactions from public view, schools need to take a more proactive stance than merely banning social networking websites to adequately address issues like cyber-bullying. The following are ten specific suggestions for educators and school district leaders to effectively address bullying and cyber-bullying which emerged as a result of discussions between Anti-Bullying Specialist and Coordinators.

1. PROACTIVELY COLLABORATE

Schools need to proactively collaborate with a variety of stakeholders to address both bullying and cyber-bullying. Do not wait until a high-profile incident has occurred and caught the attention of the local press to take action. Bullying and cyber-bullying are taking place to some degree at school and between students after class NOW. These behaviors should be explicitly and consistently addressed by teachers, administrators, and student leaders in the educational community. As Edmund Burke observed many years ago, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." Good men and women, both young and old need to proactively collaborate to address the issues of bullying and cyber-bullying.

2. SPONSOR AWARENESS EVENTS

Every student at school should understand that bullying and cyber-bullying are activities which are not appropriate or tolerated inside or outside of school. From the initial start-of-school events through the end of classes in June, school counselors, administrators, teachers and student leaders should create opportunities to discuss bullying, cyber-bullying, and strategies to address these issues. The thirteen page document attached on Cyber-bullying from Cyber-bullying.org (www.cyberbullying.org/pdf/Cyberbullying_Information.pdf) provides a wealth of tips for students, parents and teachers. Discussion about cyber-bullying and what students can do when they or someone they know is bullied online should be part of the school's ongoing Internet Safety educational program. The iSafe (www.isafe.org) curriculum is a program to consider. It includes a peer-education model that can be very effective in helping students learn more about safely using the Internet and dealing with challenging problems like bullying in F2F and virtual environments.

3. HOT SPOT SURVEYS

School administrators should regularly administer paper-based, "hot spot" surveys which invite students to identify locations on the school campus where illicit and prohibited activities are taking place. This can be done by providing students with a diagram of the school and a map key. Students should mark on the campus where activities like tobacco, alcohol and other drug use are taking place, where bullying is happening, etc. On the back of the paper, students can be directed

to write a several sentence narrative explaining their map. They should also be invited to address cyber-bullying incidents. It is critical every student be required to write on the back of their survey, otherwise only the students who are alleging prohibited behavior will write on the back and will be singled out as a result. School administrative teams can learn a great deal from regular use of "hot spot" surveys. Some surveys will inevitably contain misinformation, but usually a large amount of accurate information can also be obtained.

4. PROVIDE ANONYMOUS DROP BOXES

It takes time for a school counselor, teacher, or administrator to cultivate a relationship of trust with students. Once established, however, that relationship can provide invaluable opportunities not only for personal growth on the part of students, but also for proactive and preventative action on the part of the administration and teacher cadre. Somewhere on each school campus, students should be provided with an anonymous drop box to report bullying and other illicit activities. Again false reporting will generally occur, but accurate reporting will as well. If students grow to trust and respect the counselor and administrator(s) who are responding to their anonymous as well as signed tips, school officials can gain valuable information to prevent and deter acts of bullying on and off school campus. These tips can relate to more minor (but still important) acts of individual bullying, but also include much more serious threats involving school violence and student possession/use of weapons.

5. ADDRESS CYBERBULLYING IN THE AUP

The **school district's** behavior management plan and computer acceptable use policy (AUP) should specifically address both bullying and cyber-bullying. A series of graduated consequences should be identified for both offenses. Cyber-bullying IS bullying, it just takes place in a virtual environment and is more often anonymous. Although graduated consequences can be published, guidelines should also permit administrators to apply more severe consequences depending on the severity of the incident. Parent and student awareness and signatures on these documents are important to make everyone aware of both policies and expectations.

6. ADVANCE ACTION TEAM PLANNING

The Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Uses' sixteen page PDF document "An Educator's Guide to Cyber-bullying and Cyber-threats" (http://cyberbully.org/docs/cbcteducator.pdf) suggests (on page 15) a comprehensive "Cyber-bullying or Cyber-threat Situation Review Process." Schools should form a review committee comprised of an administrator, school counselor or psychologist, technology coordinator, librarian, school resource officer, community mental health resource person, and at least one key district or regional resource person. All incidents will not necessarily warrant the involvement of all these members, but it is important to form this group and identify an acceptable cyberbullying situation review process so evidence can be properly preserved, creators can be identified, and appropriate steps can be taken to complete a thorough investigation which results in appropriate response options for involved individuals.

7. PROVIDE "WALLED GARDEN" DSN ENVIRONMENTS

Many schools are failing to fulfill their legal and moral obligations to prepare students for their digital futures by largely ignoring the entire phenomenon of digital social networking (DSN.) The perception that all DSN is evil and all DSN environments are essentially a "wild west" environment like Facebook are false. "Walled garden" DSN environments do exist and are available for free to educators, students and parents. These environments permit adults to moderate interactions between students and help them learn appropriate uses of digital environments. The free DSN environment provided by The Oracle Foundation through Think.com (www.think.com) and the non-profit web service Imbee.com (www.imbee.com) are examples of "walled garden" DSN environments. In the case of Imbee, parents must sign an agreement for their child to participate and select which level of monitoring and moderation they want to use for their child's participation in the Imbee DSN environment. Most adults would agree driver education cannot be limited to theoretical, classroom-only study. Students must also get behind the wheel and learn to drive on the roads of the real world. The same ideas apply to the realm of digital social networking.

8. ENCOURAGE CLASS MEETINGS

School environments are extremely diverse and no single suggestion can serve as a silver bullet for the challenges presented by bullying and cyber-bullying. One suggestion would be the use of "class meetings" by teachers to identify problems and seek solutions with students. Class meetings/lessons are discussed in detail in the book, ["Positive Discipline in the Classroom: Developing Mutual Respect, Cooperation, and Responsibility in Your Classroom" by Jane Nelsen, Lynn Lott, and H. Stephen Glenn](). The culture of the classroom and the school as a whole needs to invite students to be responsible members of an accountable society, committed to helping address and resolve problems that affect other members like bullying. Class meetings/lessons, which begin with "compliments" and proceed on to "agenda items" identified by members of the class to discuss, can provide good opportunities for students to learn and practice respect as well as the skills of conflict resolution essential for healthy living.

9. IMPLEMENT NETWORK SECURE ACCESS RESTRICTIONS

Many educational networks are not presently using a secure user authentication scheme for basic Internet access. This means that when a student or other LAN user (from teachers to parents to custodians) access the school network, they can do so in a way that permits anonymity. One of the basic problems we face in educational computing environments today is a perception of anonymity that is borne from the way networks are configured and administered. We need to balance the desire to control user-behavior on the network with the need we have for accountability, resource and liability protection, but even if a balanced approach is used there is a strong need for network secure access restrictions. The basic idea is that users should be required to authenticate whenever they gain access to a school network (via a wired or wireless device) and their activities on the network can therefore be tracked and monitored. Make certain that our school district has a hardware solution that provides network secure access restriction capabilities.

10. Culture of Responsibility and Accountability

All stakeholders in the educational process in a given school, school district, and community should strive to support a culture of shared responsibility and mutual accountability. Ultimate responsibility for user behavior should be shared with individuals as well as the administrators and teachers tasked to oversee a safe and empowering digital learning environment. Since the boundaries of the digital landscape extend beyond the school property line, it is more important than ever to involve parents as well as community resource personnel in the cultivation of a safe, respectful and accountable school environment. Effective, visionary, and supportive school and district leadership is extremely important. Superintendents and principals need to recognize the importance of the tone which they set for students as well as parents. This tone is communicated in multiple ways, and reinforced best when "incidents" occur and are handled effectively.

New technologies continue to emerge every day, and change is now a constant in our lives. We cannot anticipate and control every new technology and communication method which will come down the pike, but we should do our best to foster educational cultures that support shared responsibility and mutual accountability. Technology solutions can play an important part within this culture, but the "human element" remains the most important and most challenging part of this recipe to effectively implement.