

What Principals Can Do About Cyberbullying

By Nancy E. Willard

Cyberbullying—the use of electronic-communication technologies to engage in repeated or widely disseminated acts of cruelty toward another person—is a modern-day phenomenon posing major new challenges for school officials.

From a principal's perspective, this growing social problem raises three leadership questions: When can or must I respond to cyberbullying? How can I respond effectively, so that the incident is not only resolved, but in a way that supports the well-being of all the students involved? And, what can be done to prevent these situations from occurring in the first place, or from growing into major disputes?

Today's young people do not generally distinguish between their online and offline worlds. But for principals, the "where" and "how" of cyberbullying raise significant issues related to prevention and intervention. Bullying occurring on the Internet, for example, may take place when students are off campus, on websites over which schools have no control. These sites may even be blocked by the school's filter, but it is easy for older students to bypass the filter, or access the website using a personal device while at school. Because of this, even though harmful material may be posted on a nondistrict site, students could have posted it while at school.

Hurtful text messages sent while students are in school are also a big problem. Though many schools have rules preventing the use of cellphones during school hours, these are regularly ignored. Cyberbullying by text message, however, can create a hostile school environment for students, or even lead to altercations on campus. Moreover, victimized students are often unwilling to report such incidents because the report itself would implicate them in a rule violation.

School officials must realize that even when harmful online interactions take place while students are off campus, they invariably are related to face-to-face interactions at school. Cyberbullying also can have a damaging impact at school, making it impossible for

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affected students to be successful in their studies, causing them to avoid school or school activities, or resulting in potentially violent confrontations on campus.

Guidance: *A whole-school-community approach that incorporates elements at the individual, classroom, school, parent, and community levels will be necessary to effectively prevent and intervene in cyberbullying situations.*

When do school officials have the authority to respond to off-campus student speech? Almost universally, the federal courts have said schools have the authority to respond when that speech has caused, or could cause, substantial disruption on campus or interference with the rights of students to be secure.

The problem comes with the application of this standard to specific situations. Almost all off-campus online-speech cases have involved discipline for speech targeting school staff members. In these situations, the off-campus speech must not simply cause fear and distress to the staff member, but cause or threaten to cause a disruption of school activities.

Fortunately, there is a strongly worded portion of a court ruling related to anti-bullying policies that provides some guidance on applying the "substantial interference" language to student speech directed at another student:

The 2001 ruling by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 3rd Circuit in *Saxe v. State College Area School District*, a decision written by the future U.S. Supreme Court justice Samuel A. Alito Jr., warned school officials against using so-called harassment codes that silenced free-speech rights under the First Amendment. But it also approved policy language that prohibited speech that "substantially interfer[es] with a student's educational performance."

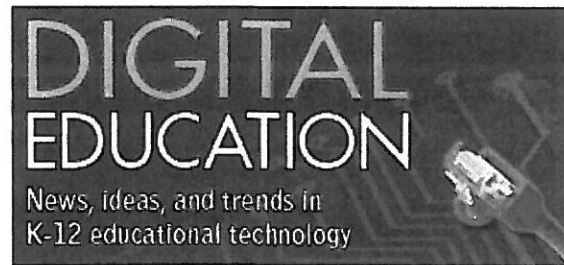
Said the appellate court: "The primary function of a public school is to educate its students; conduct that substantially interferes with the mission is, almost by definition, disruptive to the school environment."

Unfortunately, a district court judge in a California case that addressed student-to-student, off-campus online speech—*J.C. v. Beverly Hills Unified School District*—did not look to the *Saxe* standard when he ruled in December 2009 that schools must demonstrate a substantial disruption of school activities, not just an individual student's well-being. Under this reasoning, the constitutionality of all bullying-prevention statutes and policies might be suspect. The *Saxe* analysis is stronger, and clearly more responsive to the very real risks to student well-being and educational success, as well as school safety.

But in the California case, the judge also determined that the school in question had violated the student's due-process rights because there was no notice in its policy about the potential for a school response to off-campus speech. This is an important consideration.

Guidance: *Make sure that bullying policies state clearly that school officials have the authority to discipline students for off-campus speech that causes or threatens a substantial*

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disruption on campus, including school activities, violent altercations, or a significant interference with a student's educational performance and involvement in school activities.

Many research studies have provided evidence to show that students are not reporting cyberbullying incidents to adults. They fear that the adult response can make their problem worse, or that they will be "excommunicated"—losing their access to communication technologies. Beyond that, teenagers want to be able to resolve personal-relationship concerns on their own. They fear losing face with their peers if they are perceived to lack the strength or ability to resolve such matters.

Principals should recognize that these situations can represent reiterative cycles of aggression and retaliation. Sometimes, a student who posts hurtful material online is also one who is being tormented at school. Often, the incident involves larger groups of students, on each side.

The common disciplinary response is suspension. But that does not appear to be effective. This is especially true when incidents involve group aggression. Students also can easily use their free

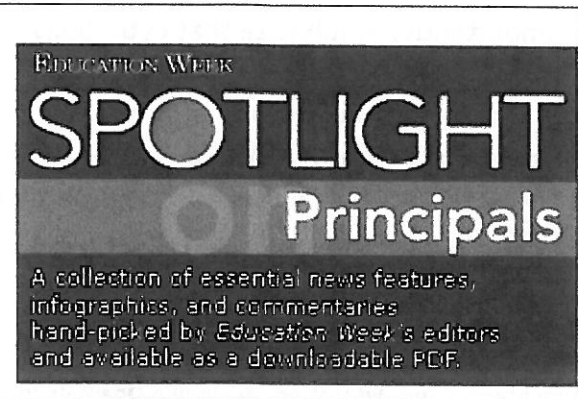
time at home to engage in anonymous online retaliation. Yet suspension is frequently demanded by the parents of students who have been targeted for bullying, and some state statutes identify suspension as the appropriate response to the problem. For effective intervention and prevention, however, it will be necessary for school leaders to move beyond this mind-set.

Guidance: *Fully investigate these incidents. If harmful material is posted online, save the evidence and promptly contact the site for removal. Use a restorative-justice approach to discipline that focuses on community service as a consequence for the harm inflicted on the community. Seek to empower the target of the bullying with skills to independently resolve this and future conflicts.*

Recognize that the student engaging in aggression is also likely to have unmet needs. To reduce recidivism, encourage remorse, and promote action to resolve the harm done, try to address these needs.

Establish a process to ensure ongoing evaluation of interventions. Request feedback from targets, aggressors, and their parents shortly after an intervention, and aggregate these reports for assessment at a district level.

From a prevention perspective, it is important to recognize that teenagers are communicating in online environments where there are generally no responsible adults present. A high priority in prevention must be to help all students gain skills in handling interpersonal relationships and dispute resolution. Encouraging peer witnesses to assist and report is very important. Peers are the ones who establish the social climate. It is less likely that adults will be able to change the behavior of aggressors directly.



Guidance: *Use a social-norms approach for prevention education. Set up situations in which students discuss their personal standards for how they treat others when using electronic communication technologies and how they want to be treated.*

Ask questions during these exercises that will guide students to deeper understandings about this virtual behavior's effects on real people. Make sure students know how to prevent placing themselves at risk, such as in not sending digital material to others that could then be distributed to embarrass them. Make sure they know how to effectively respond on their own, when they should ask for help, and what adults can do to assist them.

Most importantly, emphasize that cyberbullying is not cool. It is cruel.

*Nancy E. Willard, a lawyer and a former K-12 teacher, is the director of the **Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use**. She is the author of *Cyber-Secure Schools in a Web 2.0 World*, and has created a professional-development video, *"Cyberbullying, Cyberthreats, and Sexting."**

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