

Should Schools Regulate Offsite Online Behavior?

Yes

I'd like to slightly rephrase the question to "Should, or can, school officials respond to harmful student off-campus Internet postings?"

Concerns about students engaging in cyberbullying are mounting. Although some of this activity could be occurring at school, students most frequently are posting the harmful material online from home. This raises questions about the advisability and ability of school officials to respond.

In some cases, these incidents are minor and should be left to the students and parents to resolve. But unfortunately, many times the effect of the harmful online postings is felt very significantly at school. There is a news story of a girl in Japan



By Nancy E. Willard

who killed another student at school because she was so angry at what had been posted. Stories are emerging about young people committing suicide in response to cyberbullying. Frequently, school fights can be traced back to harmful online postings. And many young people report school avoidance, school fail-

No

We must take a reasonable approach: What else can we do? Schools are increasingly being asked to extend their reach beyond the classroom walls. The attempt to hold schools accountable for their students' personal Web page content is the latest stretch. Although there are competing arguments on both sides of this issue, advocates lose sight of a term that is central to the debate—"reasonable."

It is reasonable to expect schools to address safety issues with students. Safety is already in place in the curriculum and cyber safety is a logical fit. Most educators work to promote the safety and well being of their students.

However, although a teacher can stress the importance of looking both ways before crossing a street, it is not reasonable to expect that teacher to walk everywhere with each student and assist at all street crossings.



By Lynn Wietecha

ure, and the need to change schools, all because of cyberbullying.

As much as school officials might want to think it is not our business, the harmful effects are real and they are directly affecting the school climate and emotional well-being of students—and affecting their learning.

Can school officials respond? The current legal standard applied in these incidents is:

School officials may respond with formal discipline if the off-campus online speech creates, or threatens to create, a substantial and material disruption of the school or interference with the rights of students to be secure.

In cases involving significantly harmful online material, this standard is generally met.

But note, this standard applies to the imposition of “formal discipline”—suspension or expulsion. Even if there

are questions about whether or not a specific incident meets the legal standard, there are still other things that school officials can, and should, do to respond to these incidents—so the harm is stopped and the incidents do not reach the level of “substantial disruption.”

The most important step a school official can take is to download the material, provide it to the parents of the offending student(s) and enlist their support. This step alone is generally highly effective.

Schools should also be proactive in prevention activities. Here are some simple guidelines to be provided to students for preventing and responding to cyberbullying:

- Don't post or send information that others could use against you.
- Don't hang out where people treat you badly. Find some better friends.
- Don't retaliate! This only gives the

bully a “win” and makes you part of the problem.

- Save the evidence and seek to determine the identity of the aggressor.

Response options, depending on the severity of the cyberbullying, include:

- Calmly and strongly tell the person to stop or you'll take further action.
- Ignore or block communications.
- Communicate with the parents of the aggressor.
- File a complaint with the site, ISP, or cell phone company.
- Seek assistance from school officials.
- Contact an attorney.
- Contact law enforcement.

Nancy E. Willard taught “at risk” children, practiced computer law, and was an educational technology consultant before focusing on online risks to youth. Her book, Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: Responding to the Challenge of Online Social Aggression, Threats, and Distress, provides insight into these concerns for educators. Find more at <http://cyberbully.org>.

It is reasonable for schools to incorporate language into their technology acceptable use policies that addresses personal Web page content. The experts suggest verbiage that specifies consequences for any postings that include slander, threats, or causes a “material” disruption to school. It is reasonable for schools to intervene when a student posts a threat on a blog. It is also reasonable for schools to talk with students about the effects of statements posted on MySpace and other such social networking sites and to promote dialogue about appropriate behavior, the law, and the role technology plays in our society.

It is reasonable for schools to host parent meetings to educate caretakers on this topic and offer parents suggestions to continue the dialogue at home and tools to monitor their child's use of the family computer. It

is not reasonable for them to monitor and manage the use of that computer. Schools have no control over what students do at home and on privately owned computers.

It is reasonable to hold schools accountable for the outcomes of student learning. Schools are asked—no, they are required—to meet the state-mandated content standards, raise test scores, provide for the learning needs of all students, offer before- and after-school programs, revise curriculum to meet new mandates, develop staff talents, and promote the safety and well-being of all students—all within ever-shrinking budgets and state appropriation changes.

Is it realistic to add cyber patrol to their responsibilities? It would be much more effective to have high school administrators spending time with kids on innovative projects, sup-

porting school improvement initiatives, and promoting learning rather than surfing Web sites for inappropriate postings by students. It is reasonable to expect them to respond swiftly and appropriately when violations to a school's AUP occur, but it is unreasonable and incorrect to hold them accountable for things that are simply beyond their control. We must ask schools to make reasonable efforts to ensure appropriate use of technology resources, but we cannot expect them to have extraordinary reach beyond the school boundaries.

Lynn Wietecha, PhD, is the technology director for Dearborn Heights School District #7 in Michigan. She is also adjunct faculty in the Instructional Technology Program at Wayne State University, where she teaches graduate courses in instructional design, technology integration, and evaluation. Her work focuses on supporting teachers' effective use of technology tools.