

GRAY AREA:

Stopping cyberbullying can be tough call for educators



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By Jennifer Wohlleb, Staff Writer

What may sound like trivial nonsense to adults can be something that feels like life and death to students whose lives are now lived so much online. That is why experts recommend educators take seriously and investigate every complaint of cyberbullying in their schools.

“Sometimes as adults you think, ‘It’s just a little something online, what’s the big deal?’” said Karen McCuiston, resource center director for the Kentucky Center for School Safety. “Adults don’t understand what the impact is on kids whose lives are online. They spend at least 50 percent in the virtual world, if not 75 percent. So it really impacts them so much more than you think.”

Dismissing such concerns can not only lead to an escalation of what initially might be a small problem, but it sends students away with the wrong message.

“Educators need to understand that the degree (of the cyberbullying) doesn’t need to be to the degree of stalking or terroristic threatening for it to be something that is very important, not just to that child, but for the whole school to see,” said McCuiston, who is based at Murray State University. “Because that child is going to go back and say, ‘They said it was nothing.’ The moment educators don’t take it seriously, the word is going to get out that their school doesn’t.”

Legal gray area

With most cyberbullying happening during off-school hours and on students’ personal devices, educators’ hands can be tied legally in how they can respond to potential problems.

KSBA staff attorney John Fogle said if the off-site activity materially disrupts the educational process, the district may be able to intervene and discipline students.

“But there is no case law directly on point in our jurisdiction and cases from other jurisdictions are

not consistent,” he said. “Bullying that descends to the level of criminal misconduct can be reported to law enforcement authorities and in such cases, the school is in a stronger position to intervene, if, for example, an off campus threat descends to the level of terroristic threatening against staff or another student.”

West Point Independent Schools Superintendent Mickey Brangers said as a parent he monitors his kids’ online activities. “As a district, it’s tough because when they leave here, there’s not much I can do,” he said. “We want to do anything we can, but we can’t do a lot if we don’t know about it.”

His district and 51 others are members of KCSS’ Safety Tipline, Online Prevention (STOP!) program, which is an online link from each district’s website where students, parents and community members can anonymously submit reports of cyberbullying or any type of unsafe situations in schools.

“We try to listen when people tell us things,” Brangers said. “When people bring an issue to our attention, we listen to them, we look into it here at school.”

Bracken County Schools Superintendent Jeff Aulick said STOP is an excellent resource that enables him and his staff to respond to potential problems in an instant.

“We will get a direct email, our system will send a direct email ... we forward that on to the principal (of the affected school),” he said. “We have a fantastic relationship with our sheriff’s office, and they take it from there if it meets that criteria as far as reporting it and it can be substantiated.”

Harrison County Schools, which is also a STOP! member, has a process in place when tips are sent.

“We immediately contact that school the child attends and then that administrator addresses the issue and sends us a reply back as to how they’ve addressed the issue,” said Superintendent Andy Dotson. “You don’t have to be a student to call us.”

He said the district does hear from parents who see things posted on social media, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

“If it affects the learning process in your building, if it affects the behavior of a child in your building, you still have to address it (even if it’s not happening during school hours) because it’s very difficult for a child to function in the building if they feel threatened, if they feel intimidated, even if it’s taking place outside of school,” Dotson said. “There are avenues that you go through. If it’s something that you can deal with with two children and address it, that’s one thing; it may be a Facebook post. But then again, when you get into those more serious things, threats to do bodily harm, comments that tear down someone’s character, sometimes you may have to get law enforcement involved.”

Education and parents

Schools do their best to stop cyberbullying, but educators say parents play the most important role.

“It’s tough. It’s a battle that parents need to be as involved in,” as schools, Brangers said.

He said West Point has a Ready Fest at the beginning of each school year, which includes talking to parents about these types of issues. He also posts information to parents throughout the school year.

“We tell parents, ‘You can help stop the discipline issues here at school yourself if you wanted to,’” Brangers said. “The school system would be a better place if parents were more involved.”

Dotson said it’s difficult getting kids to understand that the things they post online can haunt them for the rest of their lives.

“When I was in school, you’d read something on the bathroom wall, paint over it and it would be gone,” he said. “But today, you post something online and it’s out there – there’s no wiping it off, there’s no changing it.”

Because students are digital natives, it is particularly important for parents to be knowledgeable. (See accompanying story)

“We’re doing whatever we can think of to protect children and get parents aware,” Dotson said. “Right now, children know more about technology probably than you and I do. They know how to use it, they know how to manipulate it, they know how to get things out there, so we’re constantly fighting that

catch up game of, hey, here’s what they’re doing.

“But it’s part of the job we have. We have to prepare students for the future and the future that we have right now is looking directly into technology and being able to handle it. You’re asking 12- 13- and -14-year-olds to make grown-up decisions when they’re not equipped to do it.”

Policies and consistency

“You have to have policies in place,” McCuiston said. “You have to have consequences when things happen so kids can see that in black and white. All these things have to be written down in an acceptable use policy. Don’t leave it just for your computers, because it’s not always going to be just your computers at school. It is anything that is brought into your school.”

She said every reported incident needs to be investigated and handled consistently.

“When you are investigating incidences of cyberbullying, notify the parents of the victim and those who have done the cyberbullying,” she said. “A lot of time, I think we want to keep all of this in-house, we don’t want to get anyone involved, but if we’re going to do something about it – and we need to do something about it – the parents need to be notified.”

She encouraged schools to do complete investigations, going beyond the who and the what, to look at the why. McCuiston cited one case where a special needs student was goaded into posting a violent threat online by other students who were trying to have fun at his expense.

“We have to have our rules in place, but we have to consider all kinds of situations, so that’s why we need a sliding scale” of punishments, she said. “Investigate. Find out why, bring the parents in. Don’t just stop with, ‘Look what you did and here’s what you’re going to get.’ Make it comprehensive so you get it right.”

CYBERBULLYING RESOURCES

Kentucky Center for School Safety:
www.kycss.org/cyberbullying.php

Information about cyberbullying laws:
www.cyberbullying.us/cyberbullying-laws

Cyberbullying Research Center:
www.cyberbullying.us/cyberbullying-legal-issues.pdf

Helping adults understand online safety issues:
www.cyberwise.org