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Districts learn about free tipline for school safety

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School districts across the state have been dealing with online threats in the wake of recent mass shootings. As many districts promote the "see something, say something" practice within schools, more are looking to provide additional tools for students or parents to communicate safety concerns.

KACIE GOODE/The Kentucky Standard
Karen McCuiston, resource center director for the Kentucky Center for School Safety, speaks with regional school district representatives Monday about the S.T.O.P. Tipline. The tipline is a free service school districts can use to allow students, parents and community members to report threats, violence and bullying.
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The S.T.O.P. Tipline (Safety Tipline, Online Prevention) allows students, parents and community members to report bullying, violence or risky behaviors using an online form. The service is offered free to districts by the Kentucky Center for School Safety (KCSS).

On Monday, Karen McCuiston, resource center director for KCSS, met with several regional school districts at the Nelson County Board of Education to explain how the tipline works and what it can offer school communities. Among those present were representatives of Nelson County and Bardstown City Schools, as well as Owen County, Jackson County, Meade County, Fayette County, Walton-Verona and others.

"I don't think there is any way you wouldn't want this in your schools," McCuiston said.

Once a school district sets up the tipline on its website, the user can click on the logo, choose from one of the three categories — bullying, violence or other issues — fill out the corresponding information, and submit.

The tips can be as detailed as the user wishes, but in hopes of receiving more specific information, the form offered through the tipline includes drop-down boxes where users can identify certain problems such as cyber-bullying, teasing, weapon violence, gang activity, dating violence and so on. The user can indicate if the issue involved them directly or another person, and the form includes spaces for information such as where the issue occurred and a narrative section for further explanation. "Risky behaviors" such as drug or alcohol use, self-harm, theft, abuse and other issues affecting students can also be reported.

The tipline does not require an email address and can be accessed day or night, though it is not a replacement for 911 and tips will likely be viewed during school hours. Users can remain anonymous unless they indicate the issue is something they need to be contacted about or if the tip involves something that needs immediate attention.

When the tipline is set up, there will be a minimum of three district personnel who receive the tips, and one will be the lead person to handle the information that comes to them. Depending on the amount of information provided for a tip, the submission could be something that requires an investigation or action from staff, or something staff members need to monitor.

While the tipline is not meant to replace face-to-face communication between staff and students, it does provide an additional tool for students to come forward with concerns.

"It's another way for your kids who were born in a digital world to be able to get to you," McCuiston said, adding many are more comfortable reaching out using a digital platform.

Information on the tipline will be presented to each local school board at meetings March 20 for consideration, with the potential to have the resource up and running before the end of the school year if they choose to implement it. The tipline was first created as a pilot project in 2013, and currently 70 school districts in Kentucky use the tool. To learn more about the tipline, visit kycss.org/stop.