



## Educators hold the codes to combat cyberbullying

by Mandy Murray, copy editor/writer



“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” It’s a common schoolyard chant, one often used to negate the effects of bullying. Although the repetition of this phrase might allow a student to put up a brave façade, the sentiment is far from the truth. Words often hurt more, and for longer periods of time, than physical injuries. And with easy-to-use technology widely available, bullying doesn’t clock out when the school day’s over. Instead, it goes to work online and via text message. How can educators battle bullying that isn’t physical?

### Learning the rules of the game

Cyberbullying is the aggressive intimidation of a person over the Internet or by cell phone. According to Stop Bullying Now, a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services anti-bullying Web site, kids can cyberbully each other through e-mails, text and instant messages, Web sites, blogs, online chat rooms and forums, etc. Cyberbullying can take many forms, including harassing e-mails and the posting of personal information about another person in a public space. Cyberbullies sometimes pretend to be someone else in order to libel; they also intentionally exclude others from online groups.

Cyberbullying can happen at any time, day or night. Studies show that cyberbullying has increased since the early 2000s; as technology has evolved, so have the many ways children communicate and post information. Messages and images can be circulated easily and quickly and to multiple people at once. Cyberbullying can evolve from in-person fights or romantic squabbles. Some kids see cyberbullying as nothing more than an

amusing game. And unlike face-to-face bullying, where a person most often knows his bully, the easy anonymity of the Internet makes it harder to identify and stop cyberbullies.

Students who are physically bullied at school might find themselves being bullied online. And sometimes, the students being bullied retaliate online, becoming cyberbullies themselves.

“It’s becoming evident that young people really are not distinguishing between their online and offline lives,” says Nancy Willard, the director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Use of the Internet. “To them, it is ‘just life.’ While it might be nice to say that ‘this is bullying’ and ‘that is cyberbullying,’ it is really not possible. By the time it gets online, it is hard to tell where [the bullying] started. Nasty comments posted online could [be the result of] eye rolling and a malicious stare in fourth-period math.”

### Defeating the bad guys

Cyberbullies are drawn to the perception that the Internet affords total anonymity. In the *Educator’s Guide to Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats*, Willard writes about the “You can’t see me—I can’t see you” phenomenon. Kids create multiple e-mail accounts and instant messaging screen names to easily hide their identities or pretend to be people they are not. This invisibility—though not complete, as Internet activities can be traced—allows for a sense of freedom from consequences. On the flip side, children who don’t receive tangible feedback about their actions, like punishment for wrongdoing, feel that they aren’t seen because no harm to them has resulted from their actions.

Education is key when it comes to the prevention of cyberbullying. Students need to know that their actions online, when they involve other students, have similar consequences to regular bullying: detention, suspension and expulsion. In some cases, the police might even become involved. Students need to be taught that posting threats online, even if they're meant to be a joke, can lead to criminal charges. "We have to help young people do a better job of responding to minor insults so they do not grow and [teach them] to help friends who are being targeted, mediate disputes and avoid behavior that causes emotional harm to others," Willard says.

Knowing the signs of cyberbullying is especially important for educators and parents. A student might be the victim of cyberbullying if he unexpectedly stops using a computer; exhibits nervousness when an instant message, e-mail or text message arrives; shows unease about attending school; and has a drastic change in mood after using the computer. A student might be cyberbullying others if she suddenly switches programs or closes windows when an adult walks by; is constantly on the computer, especially late at night; laughs more than usual while using the computer; uses multiple online accounts, including ones that are not hers; and avoids talking about her online activities.

Most cyberbullying occurs in environments where adults often don't have access. Educating students to be proactive about cyberbullying can help decrease the occurrences of the problem. Students can combat cyberbullying by not passing along harmful messages, telling friends to stop cyberbullying, blocking people who cyberbully (i.e., removing them from the list of people who can contact them) and, most important, alerting an educator or parent about the messages right away.

"Though cyberbullying may occur off campus, I think most educators will agree that the fallout bleeds over into the school and the classroom," says Rebekah Sills Lamm, the education IT safety specialist at the Texas School Safety Center (TxSSC). "I think educators' main role is teaching students safe cyber-citizenship skills through the use of technology in the classroom. Our students need to develop these skills to be competent in the work force."

## Preparing for the next level

Lawmakers have taken notice of the movement toward increasing protections for bullied students and expanding current law to include cyberbullying. During the 81st legislative session, Rep. Mark Strama (D-Austin) sponsored House Bill 1323, which would have amended the definition of bullying in Section 25.0342 of the Texas Education Code to include "expression through electronic means" and expanded the area covered by the code to include bullying occurrences that take

## A CYBERBULLYING GLOSSARY

The *Educator's Guide to Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats* by Internet-use expert Nancy Willard defines many forms of cyberbullying:



**Flaming**—Online fights through electronic messages using angry and vulgar language.



**Harassment**—Repeatedly sending nasty, mean and insulting messages.



**Denigration**—Sending or posting gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships.



**Impersonation**—Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material to get that person into trouble or danger or to damage that person's reputation or friendships.



**Outing**—Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information or images online.



**Trickery**—Talking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information and then sharing it online.



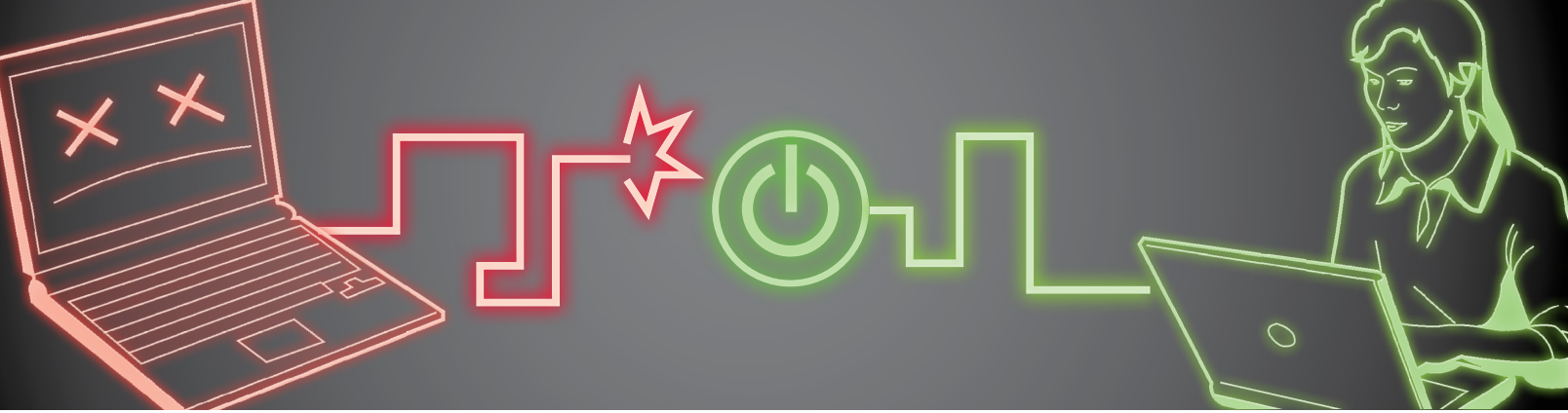
**Exclusion**—Intentionally and cruelly excluding someone from an online group.



**Cyberstalking**—Repeated, intense harassment and denigration that includes threats or creates significant fear.

place off school property. The bill would have also given school districts more than one option when it came to transferring students; as it stands, the victim of the bullying is able to request transfer to a different classroom or campus. HB 1323 would have made it possible for the school board to transfer the bully as well.

"Cyberbullying is a problem because of today's technology," says Mary Throop, Strama's chief of staff. She believes that the ease of using the Internet and cell phones has "emboldened students" to do things they might otherwise not. HB 1323 was not passed during the session, but Throop says Strama plans to refile this bill or something similar to it during the next session.



A smaller yet equally important part of HB 1323 was the amendment of Section 39.053 of the Texas Education Code, which pertains to an annual report published each year by a school district's board of trustees. HB 1323 would have added "a statement of the number, rate and type of incidents of bullying, harassment, sexual harassment and discrimination" to the report. "There is very limited state data on bullying," Throop says. "We need better data to address the problem directly." (For more information on Texas statutes that regulate bullying, read *Legal Opinions* on page 16.)

Bullying is becoming an issue on the national level as well. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently appointed Kevin Jennings to the position of assistant deputy secretary in the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. Jennings, a former U.S. history teacher, experienced prejudice in his childhood that led him to become an activist for tolerance in schools. Through this appointment, the department aims to show that school safety is about more than keeping weapons out of the classroom; it's also about decreasing bullying and teaching acceptance.

## Capturing the castle

Schools cannot effectively prepare students for their future education, careers, personal lives and civic responsibilities without embracing technologies, Willard says. By the time most kids hit age 13, they are fully capable of engaging in online activities and have been doing so for years. Teaching students not to participate in cyberbullying as well as how to combat it needs to start early in order for efforts to be fully effective. "Young people are cruising down the information superhighway with their accelerators fully engaged but sometimes without sufficient braking power," Willard says. Students need the support of engaged adults to beat the system and move on to the next level.

"Educators are the most influential and important group in the prevention of cyberbullying, aside from parents and the students themselves," Lamm says. "Schools have become the place where children learn not only math and reasoning skills, but also social skills. Schools are the place where many children first come into contact with different kinds of groups and people. Educators play a pivotal role in helping students develop tolerance and acceptance of others, compassion, empathy—all social skills that contribute to the prevention of all types of bullying, including cyberbullying." 🔄

## WEB RESOURCES

- [www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov](http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov)— Stop Bullying Now is a Web site maintained by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Health Resources and Services Administration. The site features a variety of information on bullying and cyberbullying, including tip sheets for parents and educators and a cartoon Web series that aims to engage students in discussion of the many forms of bullying.
- [www.cyberbully.org](http://www.cyberbully.org)—The Center for Safe and Responsible Use of the Internet provides reports and articles on bullying, as well as notes from director Nancy Willard's presentations on the topic. Educators will find information on teaching students about cyberbullying here.
- <http://cscs.txstate.edu/txssc/txssc-internet-safety.htm>—The Texas School Safety Center provides cyberbullying training to Texas educators, students, parents and other community members. Education IT Safety Specialist Rebekah Sills Lamm plans to provide a survey this fall that educators can use to assess cyberbullying on their campuses.
- [www.cyberbullying.us](http://www.cyberbullying.us)—A repository for cyberbullying research compiled by two criminal justice professors.
- [www.ncpc.org/cyberbullying](http://www.ncpc.org/cyberbullying)—The National Crime Prevention Council's Web site features a variety of tips for parents and kids on how to prevent and combat cyberbullying. The site features downloadable resources as well as video and audio public service announcements.
- [www.tea.state.tx.us/imet/intersafe/educators/EDcyberbully.html](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/imet/intersafe/educators/EDcyberbully.html)—The Texas Education Agency provides a list of links to a variety of informative cyberbullying Web sites.