

Cyberbullying

Bullying has long been a common occurrence in schools, but only in the past 10 to 15 years have schools taken serious, systematic measures to prevent the behavior. Not only does bullying disrupt the learning process, it can lead to serious mental and social consequences for both victims and bullies alike. But while many districts and states have made efforts to create and enforce policies to curtail traditional forms of bullying, current communications technologies are taking bullying to a new “cyber” level that requires updated policies and interventions.

In general terms, **cyberbullying is the willful and repeated use of communications technology to inflict harm on another student.**¹ These technologies include email, text messages, instant messaging, online chat rooms, web pages, blogs, and cell phones. A typical example, reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, involved an eighth grade girl who was bullied by her peers through a website called “Kill Kylie Incorporated,” which featured crude insults and innuendos about her. The bullying was so traumatizing that Kylie was forced to change schools and reported ill-effects from the experience two years later.² Such cases are becoming commonplace in schools, where the anonymity and simplicity of the Internet creates a convenient venue for malicious attacks on students and teachers alike.³

Recent studies of Internet-using adolescents show that about 32 percent of students have been the victims of cyberbullying,⁴ and nearly 20 percent have been perpetrators.⁵ Making private information about another student public is the most common form of cyberbullying, and girls, especially those aged 15 to 17, are more likely than boys to be victims.⁶ Most acts of cyberbullying occur through instant messaging and in online chat rooms. Most times, especially for teenagers, cyberbullying occurs while at home or at a friend’s house.⁷

The majority of victims have been negatively affected by cyberbullying, reflected by feelings of frustration, anger, and sadness.⁸ Negative feelings place stress on the individual and have been linked to deviant behaviors such as running away from home, cheating on tests, truancy, drug and alcohol use, and, in extreme cases, violence.⁹ Given these effects and its prevalence, it is little wonder that cyberbullying has drawn the attention of policymakers, school officials, and parents alike.

Issues to Consider

★ **First Amendment Rights.** One of the primary issues policymakers face is how far policing efforts can or should extend. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that schools cannot suppress student speech on campus unless school officials can show that suppression is aimed at preventing “substantial disruption” in the classroom as opposed to a desire to avoid the expression of uncomfortable and unpleasant viewpoints (known as the *Tinker* standard, from the 1969 Supreme Court decision). Clearly, following the Supreme Court ruling, there is a precedent for policing acts of cyberbullying on school grounds (e.g. using school computers, texting on campus, etc.).

However, most cyberbullying occurs off school grounds from personal computers in the home. Typically, state and district policies do not extend beyond school campuses, except in some cases involving school buses, school-sponsored functions off campus, and transit to and from school are included. Thus school policies, as they are traditionally written, do not cover most instances of cyberbullying.

The recently decided case of *Morse v. Frederick*, in which the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the suspension of a student who displayed a “Bong Hits 4 Jesus” banner on an off-campus sidewalk during an Olympic torch relay, may provide more support for cyberbullying policing efforts that extend to out-of-school technologies. Yet the narrowness of the Court’s decision (which would specifically permit “schools to restrict student expression that they reasonably regard as promoting illegal drug use.”) also indicates that more legal challenges in this area are likely.

In the meantime, **legal experts recommend that states, districts, and schools wishing to adopt policies addressing cyberbullying incorporate the *Tinker* standard when dealing with off-campus online speech.**¹⁰

★ **Parental Involvement.** As the majority of cyberbullying occurs in the home and off of the school campus, educating parents about cyberbullying is crucial, especially if policymakers and school administrators cannot or do not wish to police cyberbullying that occurs off-campus. Adults

are rarely present in the online environments frequented by children and youth, so parents are often unaware of the potential abuse of the Internet and other technologies. Thus, parents of children who are being bullied may often be ignorant of the fact their child is being harassed online by fellow students.¹¹ **Therefore, it is important that policymakers and schools consider strategies and policies that educate and involve parents in combating cyberbullying.**

★ **Student Internet Safety.** Stop Bullying Now! and other anti-bullying groups have advocated that a classroom component on bullying prevention be adopted by schools. The same holds true for cyberbullying. Cyberbullies can often be avoided by utilizing safe strategies and practices on the Internet, and these same strategies are often important in keeping children safe from other online predators and criminals as well. **Therefore, policymakers and schools should consider devoting classroom time to teaching Internet safety to students.**

★ **Staff Professional Development.** While the majority of cyberbullying occurs off school grounds, it does take place on school campuses as well. The effects of cyberbullying on victims also spill into the classroom and can seriously disrupt the learning process. **Thus, it is incumbent upon all school teachers and staff to be trained to properly handle reports of bullying in all its forms.** Staff should also receive training in monitoring Internet use on school grounds and on identifying potential instances of cyberbullying. Policymakers and administrators should provide professional development in these fields and encourage schools to take advantage of such opportunities.

State Actions to Address Cyberbullying

★ **Arkansas Code §6-18-514 (2007),** which requires districts to establish bullying policies, was amended to include the prohibition of “electronic acts that result in the substantial disruption of the orderly operation of the school or educational environment.” Furthermore, this prohibition applies to an electronic act “whether or not the electronic act originated on school property or with school equipment, if the electronic act is directed specifically at students or school personnel and maliciously intended for the purpose of disrupting school, and has a high likelihood of succeeding in that purpose.” **Thus, the law gives schools the specific authority to intervene against acts of cyberbullying that occur off school grounds.**

★ **South Carolina** passed its Safe School Climate Act in 2006 (Code §59-63-110 to 150) that includes the use of “electronic communication” in its definition of “harassment,

intimidation, or bullying.” The act requires schools to adopt comprehensive anti-bullying policies that include parent, school staff, and community involvement. School employees, volunteers, and other students who witness acts of bullying are also required to report the incident to school officials.

★ **Utah’s State Board of Education** amended its discipline guidelines for districts (R277-609) in 2006 to include bullying policies. The new guidelines include a definition of cyberbullying and require districts to offer students and teacher training on “electronic means for aggression inside or outside of school.” The guidelines require districts to develop intervention and awareness strategies and provide training to students and staff as part of their required bullying policies.

★ **Colorado Statute §22-32-109.1 (2005)** requires district boards of education to adopt a specific policy concerning bullying education. This statute also encourages school districts to develop “a comprehensive, age-appropriate curriculum that teaches safety in working and interacting on the Internet” that also addresses “recognition and avoidance of online bullying.”

References

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5. Patchin & Hinduja (2006).
6. Lenhart (2007).
7. Opinion Research Corporation, *Cyber Bully Pre-teen* (2006). Online at www.fightcrime.org/cyberbullying/cyberbullyingpreteen.pdf; Opinion Research Corporation, *Cyber Bully Teen* (2006). Online at www.fightcrime.org/cyberbullying/cyberbullyingteen.pdf.
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