

It Begins With a Conversation

■ *Judy Brunner and Dennis Lewis*

Eliminating digital harassment and cyberbullying begins with talking to the school community about the behavior and its consequences.

Could this happen at your school?

You become aware of a situation involving two students, Erica and Maria. You are informed that both girls are attracted to the same young man. For the past several days, the girls have been exchanging instant messages—while off campus—about the male student. Both girls have participated in electronic name calling, and it is rumored that there have been threats of a fight. In addition, you have received a call from Maria's mother, who informs you that if her daughter is injured at school because of this matter, she will hold you accountable by filing a lawsuit.

Troublesome? Yes.

Frustrating? Yes.

Complex? You bet.

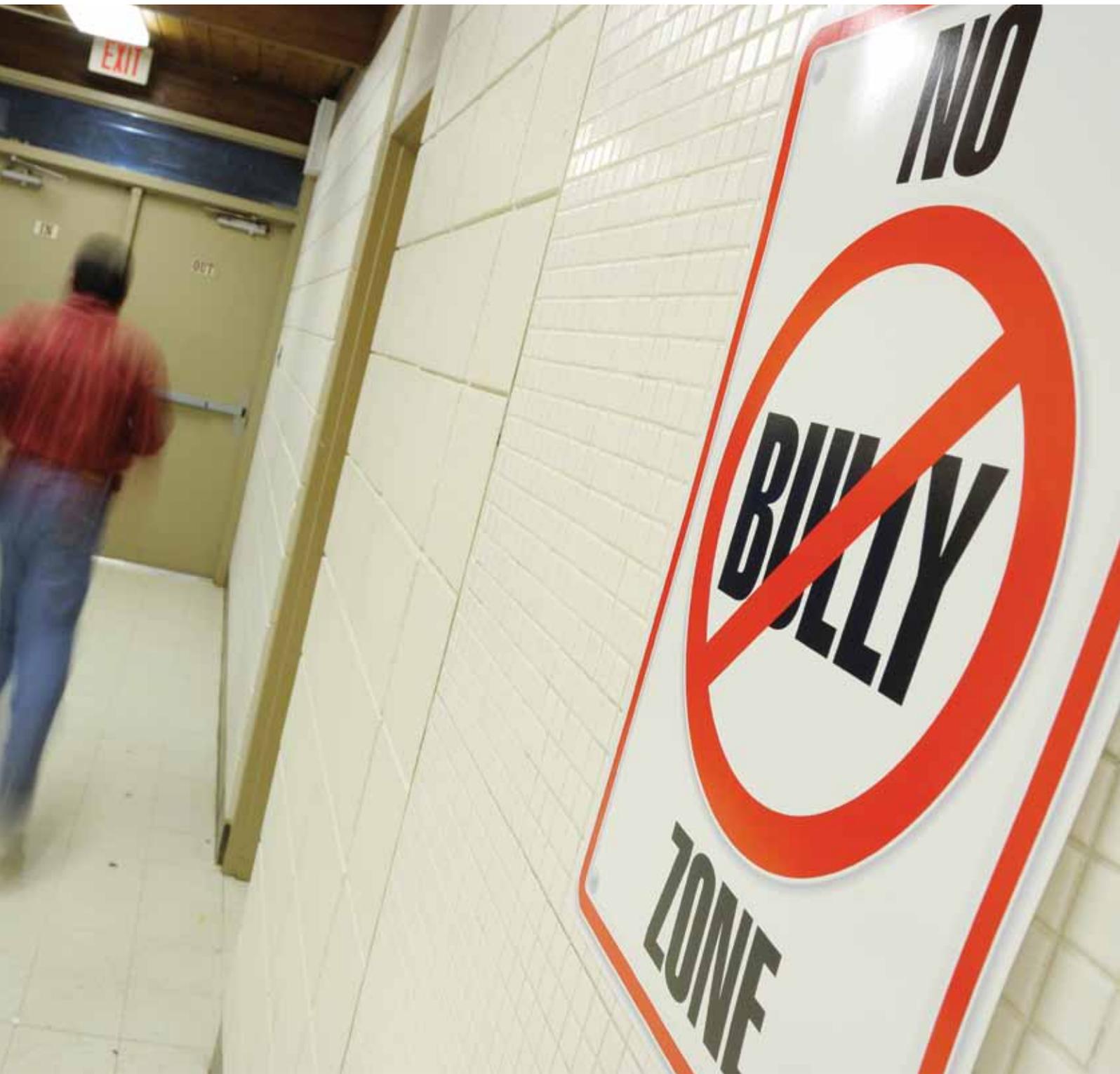
Manageable? Absolutely.

When this type of situation occurs, a school administrator's first response may be to inform the students and their parents that the harassment is not occurring at school, so it is not a violation of the student code of conduct. Upon closer examination, however, that may not be completely accurate. Although the exchanges may be happening away from campus, they are still a school problem if they affect the teaching or learning environment.

Talking Points

So how can school administrators help staff members, students, and parents address this difficult and perplexing problem? Start by having honest conversations within the school community that involve the following talking points—just remember to make the conversation a dialogue, rather than a monologue.







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FRUSTRATION AND DISCOURAGEMENT

Educators, parents, and students are bothered and upset by cyberbullying and harassment, and each group should recognize and understand the other groups' concerns.

Educators' concerns:

- There is limited time for staff development, and cyberbullying is but one more topic that needs attention each school year.
- Consistency of response to any behavioral issue at school is challenging, and bullying is no exception.
- Legal guidelines for digital harassment may not be clear because of ongoing legislative efforts at the state and the national levels as well as developing case law.

Parents' concerns:

- It may be difficult to find time to schedule an appointment with school officials.
- Although school officials may say that they are concerned, there may be little visible evidence of the school's response to an expressed complaint.
- A student's grades or school attendance may drop because of the emotional strain of the situation.
- If a perpetrator wants to remain electronically anonymous, it may not be easy to locate him or her. Time, expertise, and financial resources may be a necessary part of the solution.

Students' concerns:

- Rumors, altered photos, and so forth can be spread quickly and to multiple audiences.
- Because of the nature of available technologies, students may believe that they cannot escape from digital harassment.
- If a student victim expresses his or her concerns to parents or school officials, the result may be restricted access to electronic devices or the Internet.
- There is always the fear of retaliation against a student who reports

the problem.

- Much social networking among students occurs electronically, so if adults try to prevent cyberbullying and harassment by prohibiting social media, they may end up punishing the victim as much or more than the perpetrator.

LEGAL VULNERABILITIES

In *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* (1999), the U.S. Supreme Court established a four-pronged test to determine whether schools can be held liable for a claim of harassment:

- The school must have known about the harassment
- The school must have been deliberately indifferent to the harassment
- The school must have been able to exercise substantial control over both the harasser and the context in which the know harassment occurred
- The harassment must have been so severe, pervasive, and objectionably offensive that it deprived victims of access to educational opportunities or benefits provided by the school.

ADDRESSING OFF-CAMPUS DIGITAL HARASSMENT

“Off campus” does not necessarily mean “off limits” when it comes to student discipline. For example, in Missouri, educators may address incidents of off-campus digital harassment under the following conditions:

- If a nexus relationship is established with the school, the student, and the infraction
- If the behavior affects the educational environment
- If students or staff members are likely to be affected
- If the conduct caused or is likely to cause disruption of the educational climate (Rector, 2009).

CYBERBULLYING IS DIFFERENT

Although many parents and staff members have a mental image of what bullying is, they may or may not recognize how the electronic component affects the method and degree to which students can intimidate or stalk classmates.

Students who bully electronically may feel a sense of anonymity, and they may believe that their identity is somehow protected online. This is true to some degree, but students and parents must understand that with a little expertise and determination, most offenders can be identified. Students should also be aware that they may feel a lack of inhibition while online and refrain from saying things electronically that they would hesitate to say personally.

WHO SURFS THE INTERNET

Some people believe that surfing the Internet is a harmless or educational way to pass time, but the Web is often a place where others go to look for victims or to gain insight into someone's "extracurricular" activities.

Although it is common knowledge that sexual predators use the Internet to look for victims, what is not common knowledge is that employers, universities, and law enforcement officials also routinely review what is online. Staff members, students, and parents should not post anything online they would not want the police or a college admission board to view.

SIGNS OF VICTIMIZATION

There are a number of warning signs that someone may exhibit when he or she is a victim of digital harassment. They include:

- Quickly or unexpectedly ceasing to use the computer for no apparent reason
- Exhibiting nervousness or distress upon receiving an e-mail, text message, or phone call
- Choosing not to answer a phone call or text message

- Being reluctant to go to school, being truant, or spending an excessive amount of time with the school nurse
- Exhibiting anger or frustration while on the computer
- Being reluctant to discuss online activities with parents or other adults (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

SIGNS OF THE PERPETRATOR

Many student bullies are sneaky and good at not being caught in the act, but there are a few behaviors that might indicate that a student is bullying. According to Hinduja and Patchin (2009), the warning signs may include:

- Minimizing or deleting a computer image when approached by a parent
- Establishing more than one e-mail account, some of which may be under a different name
- Being reluctant to discuss online activities with adults
- Spending an excessive amount of time on the computer.

COMMON CHAT ABBREVIATIONS

Many adults are unfamiliar with the abbreviations students use when texting or sending an e-mail. Often the abbreviations can be explained in such a way as to appear innocuous, but do not think for a moment that students are not familiar with how to use this form of written language to clandestinely communicate with others.

Some of the acronyms that should be of concern to parents and educators are:

- NIFOC: naked in front of computer
- PAW: parents are watching
- PIR: parents in room
- POS: parents over shoulder
- WTGP: want to go private
- YBS: you'll be sorry

Principals should share this information with parents and staff members. It is tempting to believe that this is beyond administrative re-

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sponsibility, but principals must take the lead in teaching others about the language of Internet communication. For additional abbreviations, go to www.netlingo.com/acronyms.php.

UNDERSTAND SEXTING

Although still unknown to many, sexting—sending sexually explicit images or messages online—is quickly becoming a hot topic for many school administrators. As educators scramble to address the problem through board policy and student codes of conduct, law enforcement officials, legislators, and attorneys are trying to define, regulate, and manage the issue.

School officials are in a unique position to educate and facilitate discussions with parents, students, and staff members about this topic. Discussions can take place in class meetings, parent newsletters, parent education events, school Web sites, and forums for students.

Because many students still believe that sexting is a “joke,” they may disregard possible legal consequences. Unfortunately, some young people may have to pay a heavy price for participation in this activity before it gets the deserved attention from their peers.

A PLAN OF ACTION

School officials should promise parents and students that they will exercise due diligence when investigating every occurrence of bullying, harassment, or intimidation and will intervene in all situations when legally appropriate to do so. In addition, the school’s investigatory process should routinely include reoccurring three-way communication between educators, parents, and students.

Bullying and harassment will never be totally eliminated in or out of school, and education professionals must learn how to respond to incidents in a timely and appropriate manner. To do so, they must receive professional development training about the legal

issues of harassment. Principals must also issue a clear directive for staff members to report and document all incidents and their attempts to prevent and intervene in bullying behavior. Because the legal parameters for appropriate response evolve with new legislation and case law, when school leaders are in doubt about an appropriate response, they must consult with legal counsel and law enforcement officials. Finally, guidelines for response should be written down: a plan of action is of limited value unless it is put into writing.

Conclusion

The First Amendment does not protect a bully when it comes to vulgar or intimidating language. When the language or behavior interferes with another student’s educational opportunities—whether it is done inside or outside of school—it is not protected by freedom of speech or expression, and it should be addressed by school officials. Cyberbullying spreads like a virus: information travels quickly and to many people. It is no longer confined to the school day, but that does not mean it is not the school’s responsibility to take appropriate action. **PL**

REFERENCES

- Davis v. Monroe County Bd. of Ed. 526 U.S. 629 (1999).
- Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. W. (2009). *Bullying beyond the schoolyard: Preventing and responding to cyberbullying*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Rector, P. (2009, October). *Bullying prevention and intervention strategies*. Presentation at the Second Annual Safe and Secure Schools Conference. Jefferson City, MO.

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