

cdispatch.com original URL: http://www.cdispatch.com/news/article.asp?aid=7996

Amid new school rules, cyberbullying rarely reported

SEPTEMBER 23, 2010 10:58:00 AM

JASON BROWNE

Cyberstalking and cyberbullying likely take place locally, but if they do, education and law enforcement officials say they're rarely reported.

School districts around the state have installed cyberbullying policies in compliance with state legislation. The Columbus School Board approved the policy Sept. 13 to comply with Mississippi Department of Education mandates, but Assistant Superintendent David Sullivan says such behavior is rarely reported.

"I think we had an altercation once in the last couple years that loosely fits (the) harassment (definition)," he said.

In that particular instance, Sullivan says the harassment was mutual and couldn't be characterized as a bully-and-victim relationship.

Julie Kennedy, director of Overstreet Alternative School in Starkville, has been involved in just two cyberbullying cases. The first took place five years ago through e-mail and the second at the beginning of this year through the social networking website Facebook.

Columbus and Starkville officials have taken proactive steps to prevent such postings online by placing restrictions on web browsing on district computers.

"Our district computers are shut down tight. You can't get to Facebook, YouTube or any social media," said Sullivan.

Digital postings, whether online or via cellular phones, are forbidden on school grounds if the message is "malicious, discriminatory, harassing, humiliating, defaming, threatening or insulting."

However, messages sent or received off-campus are another matter. Sullivan says the district cannot take action on such exchanges unless they cause problems at school.

"Unless it interrupts the day-to-day operations of school, we wouldn't get involved," he said before adding that the district may contact the parents of students involved to make them aware of the situation.

If cyberbullying does take place on school grounds and avoids drawing the attention of faculty, a student has five days to report the harassment in writing and the district would then have five days to investigate.

Mariah Smith, an instructor with the Mississippi State University Extension Service, says parents are in a better position than school officials to deal with cyberbullying. She says 75 percent of online bullying of teenagers takes place at home and only 35 percent report the incidents to their parents.

"(Online bullying) is always available. It's not like being in school from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.," she said.

Furthermore, cyberbullying isn't just an online version of traditional teasing or physical intimidation. The advance of electronic media has provided many more methods to humiliate or harass someone.

During a presentation on cyberbullying to a group of first-year teachers Friday on the campus of Mississippi University for Women, Smith told stories of high school students altering pictures of fellow students to post online or send through e-mail. She mentioned hacking and online impersonation as major problems and pointed out that the person doing the bullying may be a third party and not emotionally involved.

Smith says many parents are surprised when she tells them girls are twice as likely to be cyber bullies as their male counterparts.

An article by Smith titled "Preventing Cyber-bullying" is available at msucare.com/pubs. The article describes methods for gathering evidence in the event of cyberbullying and explains Mississippi laws on cyberstalking.

Cyberstalking, according to Columbus Police Department Criminal Investigations Division Cmdr. Selvain McQueen, is to adults what cyberbullying is to teens and children. But like cyberbullying, he says cyberstalking is rarely reported.

Lowndes County Sheriff's Office Investigator Tony Cooper says 10 or more claims of cyberstalking may be reported in a typical month but few actually meet the definition of cyberstalking.

In short, the law prohibits any electronic transmission, whether via computer or phone, to directly threaten bodily or property harm, terrify or harass a person or persons.

McQueen reports the law is a felony and is punishable by up to two years in jail. Cooper adds that the threat must be explicit and realistic.

"If I'm in Seattle, Wash., and I say 'I'm going to kick your butt,'" the threat is there but there is little chance but there's little chance they'll carry it out," said Cooper.

The majority of convictions for cyberstalking involve text messages from cell phones, which can be traced to an individual owner. When it comes to online media like Facebook, Cooper says it's harder to prove the originator due to impersonation or hacking.

READ OUR SPECIAL SECTIONS ONLINE

Publications will be opened in a new window.



Progress 2010



FYI 2010



Sports Review 2010



High School Football Preview



Time of Your Life

FOLLOW US ONLINE



Subscribe to our free weekly email of top news stories:

Subscribe

Other special sections available online

About The Starkville Dispatch | Privacy Policy & Terms of Use
662-328-2424 | PO Box 511, Columbus, MS 39703-0511 Copyright 2010 The Commercial Dispatch Publishing Company