Social Media and Cyberbullying

Implementation of School-Based Prevention Efforts and Implications for Social Media Approaches

November 2013

Shari Kessel Schneider, MSPH

Erin Smith, MPH

Lydia O'Donnell, EdD

EDC Learning transforms lives.

Contents

Social Media and Cyberbullying: Implementation of School-Based Prevention Efforts and Implications for Social Media Approaches

Executive Summary

Schools worldwide are being charged by legislators to take action to reduce cyberbullying because of its potential to disrupt the educational process, create a hostile environment, and threaten students' feelings of safety and mental well-being at school. Yet there is a lack of research on how schools can effectively address cyberbullying, and a need to determine how schools, parents, and social networking sites can collaborate to prevent online victimization and encourage digital citizenship.

Through a systematic review of school anti-bullying policies, interviews with school administrators, and in-person and online focus groups with parents and youth, Education Development Center collected data on cyberbullying prevention and intervention efforts in 25 communities in the MetroWest Boston region. These multiple perspectives provided an in-depth understanding of the successes and challenges encountered in school-based anti-bullying strategies, leading to recommendations for expanding school-based initiatives as well as informing the education and outreach efforts of social media sites.

Key Findings

- Cyberbullying substantially impacts the school environment, particularly for girls, LGBT youth, and students with disabilities, yet the scope and severity of the problem is largely unknown due to lack of reporting and the fact that most cyberbullying is not visible on school campuses.

- The passing of the anti-bullying legislation mobilized school district personnel to develop more systematic and comprehensive prevention and intervention efforts, provided justification for the use of classroom time and staff resources to address cyberbullying, and increased awareness of the seriousness of this growing problem.

- In response to the legislation, school districts made the most progress on plans to improve and expand anti-bullying curriculum across all grade levels and enhance policies and procedures for addressing incidents. While also required by the legislation, efforts to educate staff and engage parents in anti-bullying efforts were generally given less priority.

- Schools are largely unaware of the efforts of social networking sites to prevent and intervene in cyberbullying incidents; as such, they did not incorporate online strategies into their anti-bullying plans. School personnel expressed a need for up-to-date resources from social media sites on online prevention strategies as well as guidance on how they can incorporate the positive use of social media into educational efforts.

- Increased awareness of the school's role in address cyberbullying and the implementation of new reporting mechanisms led to increased reporting of cyberbullying incidents, while also placing a significant burden on school administrators to investigate and respond.

- Despite the increased responsibility being taken by schools, youth are reluctant to involve school staff in handling cyberbullying incidents, fearing that the school response will be ineffective or may even exacerbate the problem. Many youth believed they, themselves, need to take responsibility for using social media appropriately and handling cyberbullying, but acknowledged that they needed more education on digital citizenship as well as bystander intervention.

- The ever-evolving and expanding role of social media sites has left many parents lacking the knowledge and capabilities to educate their children about online safety and monitor inappropriate use. Parents feel responsible for keeping their children safe from cyberbullying, but need additional information and outreach from social networking sites, as well as support from other parents.

Highlighted Action Steps

- Outreach and education efforts by social media sites could enhance the anti-bullying efforts of schools and parents by keeping them up-to-date on changing technologies, increasing their awareness of online prevention and intervention strategies, and guiding them on how to promote positive use of social media.

- Visible online efforts targeting youth are an important strategy to encourage them to make use of online incident reporting mechanisms, intervene as bystanders, and use social media in positive and productive ways.

- Stronger linkages between parents and schools would provide parents with increased support and technical knowledge to carry out monitoring and rule-setting to reduce negative online interactions taking place outside of school. This type of parent involvement is essential to reducing the incidence of cyberbullying and the burden on schools to respond.

- Schools would benefit from increased opportunities to share and discuss best practices in school-based cyberbullying prevention and intervention. Social media sites could play an important role in organizing and facilitating these forums, as well as identifying strategies to support school-based efforts.

To effectively address cyberbullying requires partnerships between parents, schools, and social media sites in which each stakeholder plays an active and visible role. The collaborations recommended above could help not only to reduce cyberbullying incidents but to promote digital citizenship among youth and within educational communities.

Introduction

Cyberbullying through social media has played a role in several recent, widely-publicized youth suicides, yet the ubiquitous nature of bullying behavior, which can infiltrate a youth's life both online and at school, makes it difficult to disentangle the roles and responsibilities of schools, parents, and social networking websites. Schools worldwide are now being charged by legislators to take action to prevent cyberbullying because of the potential to disrupt the educational process and threaten students' feelings of safety at school. As of December 2011, 36 states prohibited cyberbullying/bullying using electronic media in their education codes, and 13 states specified that schools could discipline off-campus behavior if it created a hostile school environment.[1] Yet there is a lack of research on how schools can effectively prevent cyberbullying and address incidents, and a need to determine how school-based efforts can inform and support the education and outreach efforts of social networking sites.

Massachusetts recently enacted some of the strictest anti-bullying laws in the country, requiring all school districts to document their bullying prevention and intervention policies and procedures.[2] This mandate provides a unique and timely opportunity to study cyberbullying prevention programs and policies through an established network of 25 Boston area communities that have been collecting data on students' involvements in cyberbullying and school bullying since 2006. In these communities, reports of cyberbullying[*] in high school steadily increased from 15% in 2006 to 20% in 2010, while school bullying remained similar in the range of 26-28%. Among middle school youth, cyberbullying reports did not change overall but increased from 18% to 22% among middle school girls, while overall reports of school bullying actually decreased from 38% to 32%.[3,4] These reports confirm anecdotal evidence that cyberbullying is on the rise.

Through systematic multi-method data collection, we engaged school leaders, parents, and youth to identify strategies for improving school-based and online prevention efforts, increase collaborations between schools and social networking sites, and encourage positive use of social media among youth in today's digital age. This report provides recommended action steps for improving school-based cyberbullying prevention efforts and expanding opportunities for linking school initiatives to the education and outreach efforts of social networking sites.

---

[*]Cyberbullying defined as using the Internet, cell phones, or other electronic devices to bully, tease, threaten, or spread rumors about someone in the past 12 months.

Research Methods

Our study took place in 25 communities in the MetroWest Boston region in which Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) has been collecting youth self-report data on school bullying and cyberbullying since 2006 through the *MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey (MWAHS)*, an initiative to monitor trends in risk behaviors funded by the MetroWest Health Foundation. To learn about school-based cyberbullying prevention strategies from multiple perspectives within these communities, we collected and analyzed data from four sources:

- **School Anti-Bullying Policies.** All school districts in Massachusetts were required by state legislation to develop an anti-bullying policy by December, 2010. We conducted a systematic analysis of each district's policy, paying special attention to school-based prevention initiatives, educational programming, and intervention strategies.

- **School Leader Interviews**. To gain a comprehensive understanding of school-based anti-bullying activities and to learn about the challenges and successes experienced with implementing the district-level policies, we conducted telephone interviews with 24 school-based key informants. These individuals were designated by district administrators as most closely involved in implementing school-based anti-bullying policies, and included: eight district-level administrators (superintendents, directors of student development, and directors of safety/technology); eight school-level administrators (principals, assistant principals, and Deans of Students); and eight health/wellness or technology coordinators.

- **Parent Focus Groups.** We conducted five parent focus groups involving 42 parents across seven school districts to understand parents' perspectives on school-based and online anti-bullying efforts, and how parents view their own roles and responsibilities in keeping their children safe from cyberbullying. Parents were recruited through school-wide announcements and messages distributed by local coalitions/parents groups. Three of the parent groups were held in-person at schools during evening hours, and two groups were held using an online webinar format.

- **Youth Focus Groups.** To learn about students' perspectives on the anti-bullying efforts of schools, parents, and social networking sites, we conducted six youth focus groups involving 64 middle and high school students in eight school districts. Four in-person youth groups were conducted at schools during health education classes and afterschool programs. Two online youth focus groups were also conducted.

Adult participants provided informed consent and were assured of the voluntary and confidential nature of their participation. Youth received written permission from their parents/guardians and provided their own assent. The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board at EDC.

Findings: School Anti-Bullying Policies

What do school policies tell us about school-based cyberbullying prevention and intervention efforts?

In May, 2010, Massachusetts enacted some of the strictest anti-bullying legislation in the nation requiring schools to address cyberbullying, even when occurring off school property, "if the bullying creates a hostile environment at school for the victim, infringes on the rights of the victim at school, or materially and substantially disrupts the education process or the orderly operation of a school."[5] Under this legislation, all public schools were required to submit a *Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan,* developed in consultation with school and community representatives, by the end of December, 2010. School districts did not receive additional funding from the state to develop or implement these plans.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education created a *Model Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan* as well as a checklist of required content to guide the development of each district-specific plan. Required components included:

- Clear statements prohibiting bullying, cyberbullying, and retaliation
- Procedures for reporting incidents, including the option of anonymous reporting
- Procedures for investigating incidents, taking disciplinary actions against perpetrators (balancing accountability with teaching appropriate behavior), and restoring a sense of safety for the victim
- Provision of age-appropriate and evidence-based instruction on bullying prevention at each grade level that is incorporated into the school curriculum
- Ongoing professional development to build the skills of all staff members, including educators, administrators, school nurses, cafeteria workers, custodians, bus drivers, athletic coaches, advisors to extracurricular activities and paraprofessionals
- Plans for informing parents and guardians about the school's bullying prevention curriculum, including how parents can reinforce the curriculum at home, and education regarding online safety and cyber-bullying.

Using these components as a semi-structured guide, we reviewed school district policies from districts in the MetroWest region to understand:
- How are schools adapting the model policy to fit community-specific needs?
- Where does cyberbullying fit into overall plans for bullying prevention and intervention?
- What opportunities exist for collaborations between schools, parents, and social media sites?

"It is the responsibility of every student, parent, and employee of the school district to recognize acts of bullying, cyber-bullying and retaliation."
– Excerpt from a Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan

What We Learned from School Anti-Bullying Policies

How are schools adapting the model policy to fit community needs?

- **About half of the district-level anti-bullying policies followed the state's model plan nearly exactly, a quarter had minor enhancements, and another quarter had substantial enhancements.** The most notable enhancements included providing specific information on student curriculum and outlining processes for reporting and responding to cyberbullying incidents. For example, one school district outlined age-appropriate bullying prevention lessons as part of their K-12 social and emotional learning curriculum. Less emphasis was given to the areas of parent education and staff professional development.

- **The majority of districts brought together a multi-disciplinary work group to develop their plans.** While the legislation required a minimum public notice and comment period, many schools went above and beyond to assemble working groups involving school-level and district-level administrators; mental health, physical education, and wellness staff; teachers; and community members, including parents. In many cases, a detailed work plan was included to demonstrate that the groups had met over the course of several months and incorporated a public comment period into their district plan prior to being adopted.

- **The incident reporting and response sections were often the most customized and concretely expanded pieces of each district's plan.** Most schools had detailed their procedures for investigation, reporting, and discipline surrounding incidents; a few included diagrams of the steps in the process and what parties would be involved at each step. Most plans did not explain if or how procedures might be different for responding to cyberbullying incidents in comparison to school bullying incidents.

- **Efforts to engage parents in bullying prevention were not described in detail in most plans.** For the majority of districts, the extent of proactive parent education/outreach efforts was a statement that a policy notification letter would be sent to parents at the beginning of each year. However, a few districts described plans for ongoing communication and education with parents. For example, one district highlighted brochures and a website where parents could access resources for talking with and monitoring their student's technology; another described plans to hold an annual bullying prevention parent discussion night.

- **The anti-bullying efforts of social media sites were not cited as a source of information, training, or support in any of the district plans.** The content of district plans did not reflect an awareness of online prevention or intervention strategies.

Even though we were already doing most of the things required [by the law], it forced us to engage the whole community."
– School Leader

"Everyone wanted to be involved – parents, community and religious leaders, students, etc. No one said no when we asked."
– School Leader

- **Schools with supplemental funding were more likely to enhance their district policy beyond the minimum recommendations.** The majority of schools that made substantial enhancements to their plan from the state model policy had received grant funding to implement anti-bullying programming. This included bringing in outside organizations to implement evidence-based anti-bullying programming for students, and hiring guest speakers for staff professional development on specific bullying topics. Most schools that were not part of this grant program did not detail additional efforts beyond the legislative requirements.

Where does cyberbullying fit into overall plans for bullying prevention and intervention?

- **Most district plans did not differentiate between school bullying and cyberbullying in their prevention or intervention efforts.** As required by the state legislation and modeled in the state sample plan, all districts made explicit statements that bullying policies and programs should encompass all forms of bullying, including cyberbullying. When distinctions were made, they occurred most often in the areas of prevention curriculum and incident investigation procedures.

- **Strategies for staff training and professional development often lacked specificity, especially when it came to cyberbullying prevention.** Most district plans did not mention how and when staff would receive anti-bullying training, the degree to which it would incorporate cyberbullying, or how it would be kept current with changing technology.

What opportunities exist for collaborations between schools, parents, and social media sites?

- **While all districts were required to involve the community in the development of the intervention and prevention plan, very few identified ongoing collaborations between with parents or other community members.** Ongoing partnerships between schools and parents could serve not only to support parents in their efforts to keep their children safe at home but also to reinforce lessons taught in the schools

- **The anti-bullying efforts of social networking sites were not considered in the formation of district-level policies.** This is clearly an area for growth and partnership, as social media sites are well suited to provide schools with information and training about existing online prevention initiatives as well as changing technologies that schools must keep up with in order to promote positive use of social media.

"As we have developed our Plan, we have done so with an understanding that new challenges and ideas will emerge during its implementation. Thus we welcome feedback and look forward to working together with parents, students, community members, and all staff to create a safe and respectful learning environment for all students."
– Excerpt from Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan

*   *   *

In general, we found that most school district plans lacked specific information on cyberbullying, particularly when it came to student curriculum, parent education, detailed plans for professional development, and opportunities for collaboration within the community. However, when we conducted interviews with school leaders, we learned that the policies did not always reflect the breadth of efforts occurring at the schools. Indeed, many districts are doing much more, especially around prevention programming and curriculum development.

Findings: School Leader Interviews

What can school anti-bullying leaders tell us about the prevention and intervention efforts happening in the schools?

Interviews with 24 key informants yielded critical information about how schools are addressing cyberbullying, how the state anti-bullying legislation has impacted their education and prevention efforts, and how their efforts can inform those of social networking sites. The individuals designated by each district as most involved in bullying prevention efforts ranged from district superintendents to building administrators to health/wellness and technology staff, showing great variation across districts in the training and background of those who direct bullying prevention efforts. As these findings show, schools are doing much more to prevent and intervene than is reflected in their district plans.

What is the impact of cyberbullying in the schools?

- **School leaders believe that cyberbullying has a substantial and detrimental impact on students' well-being and the functioning of their schools.** They described it as "spilling into the schools" and affecting victims' abilities to learn and relate to peers.

- **The extent of cyberbullying is unknown because of lack of reporting.** While school leaders feel like they have a very good read on the extent of face-to-face bullying, they cannot grasp the magnitude and severity of cyberbullying due to low reporting and lack of visibility of incidents on the school campus. Perceptions of the extent of the problem varied widely from district to district, but most school leaders believe they underestimate the proportion of students involved as victims and/or perpetrators.

- **The majority of bullying incidents that occur at school also involve some element of cyberbullying**. While not always beginning online, school leaders explained that most in-school incidents are either provoked or exacerbated by online communications.

Who is impacted by cyberbullying?

- **Girls are disproportionately affected by cyberbullying.** This finding from school personnel is consistent with the research on bullying, which has found that girls are more likely to engage in the types of bullying that can be executed online, such as verbal bullying, rumors, and exclusion. Several leaders remarked that girls endure cyberbullying because of a fear of being "unplugged" and unaware of social interactions and what might be being said or posted about them online.

> *"At this point, almost 100% of altercations or issues or fights that occur at school originate or were aggravated via the Internet."*
> – School Leader

> *"Some kids are coming to school highly anxious. It's hard for them to focus… they have a fear of cyberbullying happening at any moment."*
> – School Leader

- **Youth with disabilities, particularly those affecting social functioning, are at higher risk of being involved in cyberbullying.** Several school leaders explained that youth who struggle socially may find opportunities to practice social skills online in a positive way, but may also become involved in negative interactions as victim and/or perpetrator.

- **Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth also appear to be at greater risk of being victimized.** This was noted most at the high school level, as youth are exploring sexual identities and peer relationships.

- **Cyberbullying is generally viewed as a more common problem among middle school students.** This perception is driven by higher reports in middle school in some districts as well as the belief that younger youth lack the social skills to use social media appropriately.

How has anti-bullying legislation impacted schools' efforts to address cyberbullying?

"Before the legislation, we didn't share information. Guidance counselors, heath classes, nurses, school community were all doing different things. Now we are on the same page."
– School Leader

"[The legislation] helped us to develop a common language, approach, and philosophy."
– School Leader

- **School leaders universally agreed that the anti-bullying legislation spurred them to initiate new plans to address cyberbullying**. It positively impacted their plans in many areas, including education/curriculum, incident investigation and response, staff training, and parent education.

- **The legislation led to heightened awareness of the issue of cyberbullying within schools and the broader community.** It forced school districts to devote time to thoughtful review and revision of their curriculum, prevention programs, and policies, and to invite diverse members of the school and broader community to the table to discuss the most appropriate school-based response.

- **The legislation forced school districts to agree upon and utilize a standard definition of cyberbullying in addition to bullying.** Prior to the legislation, greater variation existed in school personnel's understanding of what constituted bullying – schools were misinterpreting misconduct or isolated incidents as bullying. Now, there is greater clarity on what constitutes bullying and cyberbullying, namely the repetitive nature of the interactions and the power imbalance between those involved, helping school staff to better identify and act upon incidents.

- **Prevention and intervention efforts are now more systematic and comprehensive.** Because school districts were forced to lay out their plans for Kindergarten-12th grade curriculum and incident investigation and response, there is now greater uniformity in how these things are handled from classroom to classroom, or administrator to

administrator. However, several school leaders explained that lack of consistency in how incidents are viewed and treated remains a problem, particularly when comparing the approaches of middle and high schools.

- **While some districts were stimulated by the legislation to go above and beyond existing efforts, others are struggling to meet the legislative requirements.** Several school leaders noted that the lack of funding associated with the state mandate made it impossible to respond to all elements of the legislation in a comprehensive way. Others explained that schools were not given enough time to incorporate the changes necessary to fully implement the law, with the areas of staff training and parent education being given lesser priority. Despite this, school leaders agreed that their efforts to enhance bullying prevention and intervention would continue, and that the legislation had focused their attention and initiated the planning process.

What education and prevention strategies do schools use to address cyberbullying?

- **While the legislation mandates developmentally appropriate education at all grades from Kindergarten through high school, the breadth and depth of bullying prevention curriculum varies substantially.** About one third of districts had fully developed and coordinated curriculum plans in which bullying prevention was infused into multiple types of classes at all grade levels. Around half had programs in which bullying prevention received substantial time in some grades but was not given equal or adequate weight throughout a child's education. A small number of districts only introduced bullying prevention minimally to meet the legal requirements. Often, these districts were struggling with pressures to improve student achievement and felt they could not afford to give up academic time for bullying prevention

- **The legislative mandate to use evidence-based curriculum gives districts little flexibility in their curriculum decisions.** Due to the limited number of existing evidence-based curriculums, some schools struggled to make appropriate selections that could be incorporated into their current scheduling and teaching. A few schools expressed concern that they were being forced to abandon their current approaches, which they believed to be effective, because they weren't evidence-based.

- **The legislation supports districts' efforts to provide Social Emotional Learning (SEL).** About one-third of districts reported efforts specifically devoted to helping students recognize and manage emotions, develop empathy, make responsible decisions, and establish positive relationships with peers. While most of these schools were already teaching SEL to some degree, the legislation legitimized these non-academic lessons.

"Now we have wider buy-in from all staff, teachers are less guarded about giving up class time for bullying prevention."
– School Leader

"It's forced us to keep the focus on social emotional learning. [Without the legislation], it might have gotten pushed out of the way with all of the other testing demands. When principals look at the MCAS [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System] scores they don't see measures of social emotional learning. Their job is on the line."
– School Leader

Others had new plans to adopt elements of SEL as a result of reviewing and evaluating their district efforts in response to the legislation.

- **The legislation supports peer education and peer leadership programs.** Peer leadership was described by one as one school administrator as the "crown jewel" of their cyberbullying prevention strategy. About one-third of schools had peer leadership programs specifically to address bullying. Best practices within peer education programs included older students implementing cyberbullying prevention programs for younger kids, programs to encourage positive social norms around appropriate internet use, and programs to encourage peers to be leaders in bystander intervention.

- **The legislation focused all schools on creating positive school climates in which bullying and cyberbullying are less likely to occur.** Nearly all school leaders spoke explicitly about creating school cultures in which students and teachers model positive behaviors, support one another, and promote healthy peer and student-teacher relationships. While teaching these core values was not new, the legislation prompted a resurgence of efforts to focus on these core values and incorporate strategies such as School Climate Committees made up of students and teachers and small group "advisory periods" that allow students to build connections with one another and their teachers.

How do schools respond to cyberbullying incidents?

- **The legislation legitimized schools' efforts to address cyberbullying incidents, the majority of which take place outside of school.** Before the legislation, there was great variation in the degree to which schools became involved in cyberbullying that occurred off of school property. Now schools are both responsible for and being held accountable for investigating all incidents, providing support and a safe school environment for victims, and providing education and consequences, as necessary, for perpetrators.

- **The legislation led to more concrete policies for investigating incidents and taking actions with respect to protecting victims and educating and disciplining perpetrators.** Whereas most schools did not have clear plans to follow prior to the legislation, the majority had since carefully mapped out their routes of investigation and discipline policies, leading to greater transparency.

- **The legislation sparked an increase in reporting of cyberbullying incidents to schools.** The majority of districts noted a rise in reports of cyberbullying after the legislation was passed. Key informants attributed this increase to heightened awareness of and sensitivity to the definition of cyberbullying , as well as new

mechanisms for reporting, including opportunities for anonymous reporting. The initial spike in reporting was thought to result from both confusion about the definition of cyberbullying and a hyper-sensitivity in which parents and students were calling every negative online incident an incident of cyberbullying. In most situations, the cyberbullying reports leveled out after this initial spike, but were still higher than before the legislation.

- **Along with this increase in school-level responsibility to address cyberbullying has come a challenge to effectively respond to the multitude of incidents being reported.** Many administrators found the task of investigating all reported cyberbullying incidents overwhelming. Yet they acknowledged the importance of treating these cases seriously and responding expeditiously, especially since they believed cyberbullying incidents to be more severe than those occurring on school property.

How do schools train staff to prevent and intervene in cyberbullying?

- **The legislation increased anti-bullying training for teachers and other school staff, but the majority of districts were planning to do more.** The most common response to the legislation was to incorporate a brief training on bullying into existing staff training sessions. Some school leaders felt that they had strong educational components for teachers but that training was not equivalent for other staff, such as administrative staff, custodians, and others who are also mandated to be trained by law. Others felt that they simply had not carved out enough time for teacher training in the initial year following the legislation, and hoped to do more in the future.

- **Most districts lack the capacity and resources to provide ongoing training that keeps up with the changing nature of online communications.** Many school leaders felt intimidated by the fact that students were often more advanced in their knowledge and use of social media, and that this was a barrier to their prevention efforts.

How do schools involve and educate parents?

- **The legislation has provided a mechanism for parents to obtain support through the schools.** Most school leaders believed parents were aware that they could seek help through the schools if their child was involved in bullying. However, several barriers were noted including resistance to the idea that their child may be involved in bullying, especially as a perpetrator, and fear of retaliation against themselves or their children because of concern that the incident may become more public if they involve the schools.

"Kids are way more advanced than the adults in this district. They have far surpassed us in their knowledge. There's a lot of catch up going on. Staff is mixed in age and experience, and this makes it challenging."
– School Leader

"There is fear out there for teachers. We think students are smarter than us. We are not as educated as we could be."
– School Leader

"[The legislation] has empowered parents to know they can go to the school and don't have to deal with it on their own."
– School Leader

- **The legislation increased efforts to educate parents, but most districts do not have comprehensive plans in place for parent education and outreach.** Many school leaders described their efforts to engage parents as more reactive than proactive. When schools did offer parent anti-bullying events, they were often poorly attended. Noted exceptions included one district with a strong parent-school coalition that had continued success in hosting multiple parent discussion forums and educational events. Another district described high attendance at an Internet training for parents that was led by high school students.

What is the role of online efforts in school-based prevention and intervention?

- **The vast majority of school leaders were unaware of the efforts of social networking sites to prevent and intervene in bullying situations.** Those who had some knowledge were skeptical that online efforts would produce any results or simply didn't know enough about them to incorporate them into their school-based efforts. Therefore, school-based efforts were designed to function within the schools and surrounding physical communities, without relying on the prevention efforts and intervention mechanisms of social networking sites.

- **A lack of advanced understanding of technology among most staff, namely a "generation gap" between them and their students, hinders their ability to understand and make use of online anti-bullying tools.** In many cases, the lack of awareness of online efforts was directly related to the lack of comfort or interest in using social media.

- **Schools are struggling with teaching students about positive use of social media versus prohibiting use of social media sites as a way of protecting students from cyberbullying.** School leaders acknowledged the need to teach digital citizenship to students and support them in appropriate use of the Internet, including social networking sites. However, the immediate response in most schools to keeping students safe was to prohibit use of these sites.

*   *   *

The interviews with school leaders revealed important information about the impact of state anti-bullying legislation and the successes and challenges of school-based cyberbullying prevention approaches. In addition, they identified a need for greater linkages with parents, who are on the front-line of prevention. What do parents know and think about the school-based efforts, and what kind of education and support do they need to keep their children safe?

Findings: Parent Focus Groups

How do parents protect their children from cyberbullying?

Focus groups with parents provided a wealth of information on their struggles to keep up with changing technologies, understand school policies and programs around cyberbullying prevention, and carry out effective parenting strategies at home to keep their children safe online. Parents from five focus groups representing seven school districts shared their views on their roles and responsibilities and their needs for additional support and guidance.

What do parents think about cyberbullying's impact on youth?

- **Parents are highly concerned about the impact of cyberbullying on their children.** The majority of parents worried about the immediate repercussions of hurtful comments on their children's emotional well-being. However, many felt powerless to protect them because there were not fully aware of the mechanisms through which bullying could occur online.

- **Parents are particularly worried about the permanency of online communications and its potential impact on their children's futures.** They expressed concern about their children making "mistakes" online – posting things on impulse or in ways that might be misinterpreted without the proper context. They worried about the "digital footprint" their children are leaving and whether it will affect their ability to get into college and find jobs.

What are parents' views of their role in cyberbullying prevention and intervention?

- **Most parents feel primarily responsible for preventing their children from being cyberbullied.** The majority of parents acknowledged that they are the ones who can take on the biggest role in setting rules and monitoring their child's internet use.

- **Despite their sense of responsibility, most parents lack the technical knowledge to protect their children from cyberbullying.** Parents explained that they are playing a game of "catch up," and are unable to do adequate parenting around this issue given their lack of knowledge of technology.

- **Parents are seeking more support from each other in setting appropriate rules and modeling appropriate online behavior.** Several parents described feeling pressured to relax their household rules because, by following rules on age limits or restricting their chlid's Internet use at certain hours, their children were becoming socially

"As parents we are responsible for all aspects of our children's growing up, and anti-bullying is just one piece of it. Parents are, in most cases, the ones providing the technology and giving access, so they need to make sure kids understand how to use it responsibly."
– Parent

"Most parents feel that they are catching up. They are trying to be proactive but the technology changes so quickly that they can't keep up with their children."
– Parent

"I always hear from kids that everybody else's parents let their kids do this or that, but if parents were aware of what more parents were actually doing, it could make a big difference."
– Parent

excluded. They wanted parents to commit to each other to model positive behaviors, enforce website age restrictions, and guarantee safety and monitoring in a consistent way across households to keep all kids safe.

What do parents know about anti-bullying legislation?

- **The majority of parents lack specific knowledge about the anti-bullying legislation.** About one third of parents were aware of the requirement that schools address cyberbullying incidents, but most were uncertain of the boundaries between what schools could and should handle. Several parents still believed that cyberbullying that takes place outside of school was not the school's responsibility. Others expressed disbelief that schools could adequately address incidents that took place at home, despite the accountability brought on by the legislation. A few parents commented that the legislation had increased awareness about cyberbullying in the schools and had improved the school's response to it, but most lacked sufficient knowledge of the legislation to have an opinion about its effectiveness.

What do parents think of school-based efforts to address cyberbullying?

Educational approaches for students

- **Few parents are aware of education and prevention activities that schools are implementing for students**. Most parents had heard of special assemblies or other one-time events but were not familiar with ongoing aspects of schools' anti-bullying efforts that were integrated into classroom curriculum. In general, parents believed that schools were taking action, but felt that the schools were not communicating this to parents, making it difficult to reinforce educational lessons at home. Only a few parents were aware of social emotional learning programs or other types of efforts aimed at changing school climate.

Addressing incidents

- **Most parents are unaware of how schools handle cyberbullying incidents.** While most parents were aware of mechanisms to report incidents, they did not believe students and parents reported incidents often enough, or that the reports were truly anonymous. They also lacked confidence that schools address incidents adequately. A few parents noted that schools' efforts to protect victims' and perpetrators' privacy gave the impression that schools were not doing much in the way of consequences for perpetrators.

Educating and involving parents

- **Few parents were aware of or had attended any parent education events hosted by schools.** Those who had attended observed that the only parents there were those already vigilant about their children's online behavior. The exception was one community with a strong parent-school coalition, who had greater success at attracting parents to events.

- **The introduction of new technology to students in the schools presents an additional challenge to parents.** Often schools incorporate the use of social media or other websites into classroom activities, or coaches may use social media to communicate with team members. This complicates parents' abilities to set rules and monitor because they must accommodate these uses.

- **Parents want schools to increase outreach and education efforts to help them keep their children safe.** While acknowledging their responsibility in protecting their children from cyberbullying, parents believe that schools are in the best position to educate them about online safety. Most parents felt somewhat "lost" in terms of where to go for guidance and education, and the school was viewed as a trusted source of information despite some school adults expressing the same lack of technology expertise as parents.

How do parents view the role of social media sites?

- **Parents are largely unaware of efforts by social media sites to keep kids safe from cyberbullying.** Few parents knew of any anti-bullying resources on these sites or mechanisms through which the sites respond to reports of negative behaviors. They would like social media sites to provide greater transparency on how they function and to provide education and outreach to support their parenting efforts.

- **Parents want sites to create mechanisms that make it easier for them to monitor and restrict their children's online behaviors.** Specifically, parents asked for more security and privacy for their children and greater enforcement of age restrictions.

- **Parents emphasized the need for social media sites to teach digital citizenship.** While they want more control and restrictions, they felt it equally important to teach their children about how to behave in positive and productive ways on social media sites, including being active bystanders and promoting social responsibility.

"Schools are playing such a big role in addition to parents. So much online technology is used by the schools – it makes it difficult for parents to control."
– Parent

"Social networking sites have to take ownership to push out the information to responsible adults."
– Parent

*　　*　　*

The parent focus groups showed that most parents accept responsibility for keeping their children safe yet often lack the capability to do so. Similar to school personnel, they struggled to keep up with their children's more advanced knowledge of social media and technology in general. The parents we spoke with identified a clear need for guidelines on how to protect their children, as well as support from other parents. What do their children think about their parents' efforts, school initiatives, and online prevention efforts?

Findings: Youth Focus Groups

How do youth view the prevention and intervention efforts of schools, parents, and social media sites?

Focus groups with over 60 middle and high school youth revealed what they think about the problem of cyberbullying and how they think parents, schools, and social media sites could better address the issue.

How big of a problem is cyberbullying?

"I think cyberbullying's a huge problem… it's something I see every day on every site."
– Student

"I could completely not know a person, but I can see this huge [online] fight between people, and the gossip about it at school is so much worse. With face-to-face it wasn't as widespread. People can egg it on [online] with comments, and it's so much more public."
– Student

- **Youth universally agreed that cyberbullying is more widespread and harmful than face-to-face bullying.** This was due to the often anonymous nature of cyberbullying and the intensity of negative comments and postings that can be "witnessed" by hundreds of people over a prolonged period of time.

- **Cyberbullying that occurs outside of school affects youth's social and emotional well-being at school.** Youth talked about the fear of coming to school to face the many other students that have been online witnesses to bullying. They mentioned it can impact a student's concentration, self-esteem, and lead to anxiety, consistent with the observations of school administrators.

- **Cyberbullying is viewed as a particularly widespread problem among girls.** Youth acknowledged that girls use different bullying tactics than boys, such as social exclusion and rumors, and that these tactics can easily be executed online. Several girls spoke about the problem being exacerbated by girls' fear of not being "connected," in that they continue to maintain online contact with someone who is victimizing them in order to stay aware of what they are posting and how others are responding.

What do teens know about anti-bullying legislation?

"Things that start in person continue online; kids get anxious about interacting with people in the halls because of cyberbullying."
– Student

- **More than half of students were not aware of the state anti-bullying legislation.** Those who had any knowledge of it understood that schools were responsible for addressing cyberbullying to some degree, but rarely knew anything specific about the types of incidents to which schools are required to respond, the steps schools take to intervene, or the requirements for anti-bullying education at all grade levels.

What do students think of school-based efforts to address cyberbullying?

Policies

- **The majority of students had little knowledge of school policies around cyberbullying prevention and intervention.** Some students recalled seeing the policies in their student handbooks, but had never read them or couldn't recall any specifics. Very few students, other than those who were peer leaders, remembered any discussion or education around the school's anti-bullying policies, and students were unaware of the consequences for perpetrators.

- **Students described inconsistencies in adherence to policies regarding online communications, which sent mixed messages about how seriously schools sought to address cyberbullying.** Examples include inconsistent enforcement of policies against cell phone use at school and/or lack of response from teachers when students tried to bring cyberbullying incidents to their attention.

Educational approaches for students

- **Students did not believe that current school-based bullying prevention efforts were making an impact.** They recalled only one-time events (e.g., guest speakers, "No Name-Calling Week") that were memorable but did not teach skills to keep themselves safe. They also did not view initiatives to improve school climate as anti-bullying efforts.

- **Many youth described a need for more education for students on what constitutes cyberbullying, and how to participate in online communities appropriately.** Youth believed that a substantial amount of cyberbullying stems from poor judgment and a lack of understanding of what types of actions can be considered cyberbullying. While they didn't recognize the term, "digital citizenship," their comments reflected a need to teach appropriate and responsible use of online communications.

- **Students stated that peer education is the best way to teach kids about cyberbullying prevention and bystander intervention.** They believed that only youth understand the realities of cyberbullying and growing up in the digital age, and explained that the best way to make an impact is through sharing of personal experiences. They believed this type of education would increase their awareness of bullying behaviors and help them recognize and intervene when problems occur online.

"The school does have a fairly clear explanation in the student handbook, but it seems a lot stricter than it's actually enforced. It seems like a mixed message."
– Student

"Schools make it really well known that you can print it out and come in to talk about it, but I don't think a lot of kids have the courage to do it or think that it's worth it to do."
– Student

Addressing Incidents

- **Students are aware that they can report cyberbullying incidents to their schools, but are reluctant to do so.** Reasons include:
    - Fear of being teased or victimized further as a result of coming forward.
    - Apprehension that more people – both students and staff - will learn about the incident, leading to widespread embarrassment and prolonging the bullying.
    - Desire to keep personal information and conversations private from school personnel.
    - Fear of having to confront the situation in person at school if reported, which could be more intimidating than enduring than the online bullying.
    - Disbelief that the school can or will take appropriate actions to relieve the situation, due to lack of awareness of how the school handles incidents and what the consequences are for those involved.

- **Despite these many hesitations, students wish they felt more comfortable reporting incidents.** They also said they would report an incident if they felt that someone involved might be unsafe, physically or emotionally.

What do students think of their parents' efforts to address cyberbullying?

- **Parents' lack of experience with technology makes it difficult for them to offer support or advice to keep their children safe.** This is exacerbated by their lack of ability to discern whether a comment may be cyberbullying or simply reflect the typical nature of teen online communications.

- **While students want privacy and freedom online, they admit that parental monitoring prevents them from being targets of cyberbullying.** Students reported large variations in their parents' monitoring behaviors, from none at all to extensive supervision of all online activities. While monitoring led some students to engage in secretive behaviors to maintain their privacy (e.g., creating multiple profiles), others appreciated the additional level of safety provided by their parents' supervision of their online activities.

How do teens view the role of social media sites?

- **Most teens are unaware of online efforts to prevent or intervene in cyberbullying incidents.** Those who did know about the existence of online prevention strategies (e.g., reporting mechanisms) doubted their effectiveness or feared retaliation if someone found out they took action online to report an incident.

"Parents have never experienced it. They don't know how to handle it or what advice to give that would be helpful. They just don't know about technology."
– Student

"Kids have a hard time telling if something someone said is cyberbullying or just joking, and parents don't understand it on a whole other level."
– Student

"As awkward as it was, my dad was my first friend on Facebook and it just makes it that much more safe."
– Student

- **In general, teens expressed doubt that online efforts could be successful at reducing cyberbullying.** They believed there was no way to control what people say given the huge expanse of social media and impossibility of being able to attach appropriate meaning to what teens post without additional context.

<p align="center">*   *   *</p>

While the teens' comments reflected a desire to maintain privacy and independence, they revealed several strategies that could be effective in keeping them safe from cyberbullying, including: greater parental involvement and additional education on appropriate use of social media and bystander intervention. As reflected throughout this report, the comments from youth further supported the need for linkages between parents, schools, and social media sites to engage them in positive and productive use of digital media.

"My parents used to shut off my internet and phone at a certain hour so I could just do my homework, but it did work at keeping me off social media when people who would have bullied me were on. It was tough, but it worked."
– Student

Conclusions

What are the roles and responsibilities of schools, parents, and social networking sites?

A key goal of this research was to disentangle the roles of schools, parents, social media sites, and youth in preventing cyberbullying and addressing incidents when they occur. Comments from all of these stakeholders revealed that progress is limited without collaborations across all of these groups. However, there were distinct differences in the degree of responsibility assumed by each of these groups:

"The schools have a role in educating the students about making good choices, responsibility. But in the end, it's the parents' responsibility to monitor, to friend their kids on Facebook, let them keep their phones in their rooms at night… Schools can do the education and vigilance and informing of parents, but ultimately we are not at home with kids and their iphones."
– School Leader

- School leaders, while required by law to address cyberbullying, seek greater involvement from parents to carry out essential monitoring and rule-setting to limit their children's negative online interactions.

- Parents assumed responsibility for being actively involved in monitoring, rule-setting, and modeling positive interactions, but looked to the schools to provide them with guidance and support, as well as the necessary technology education to carry out these parenting responsibilities.

- Youth recognized that they assume a certain level of risk by using social media sites, and that it is their own responsibility to keep themselves safe, not the responsibility of sites or schools to police their online communications. At the same time, they acknowledged that greater involvement of parents was successful in curbing their involvement in cyberbullying, despite wanting to minimize parental monitoring of their behaviors.

- Youth felt that schools should be involved in prevention and education around cyberbullying, but had conflicting opinions on whether incidents that occurred outside of school could be addressed appropriately or effectively by the schools. Schools, on the other hand, felt primary responsibility for dealing with incidents, with education and prevention often coming second, simply because they don't have the time to invest equally in both.

- All groups believed that social media sites have a responsibility to reach out to parents and schools with information about keeping kids safe and encouraging digital citizenship. Schools believed that social media sites could provide valuable education and outreach on how they can integrate social media into curriculum while preventing involvement in cyberbullying. Parents believed social media could enhance efforts to restrict inappropriate use and educate parents on how to play an active role in prevention. Youth believed that they could benefit from more

information about steps to take if they become involved in cyberbullying, and about how to use social media for positive good.

What action steps are recommended to cyberbullying and encourage digital citizenship?

To prevent cyberbullying, strong linkages must be established across schools, parents, and social media sites. Coordinated efforts at home, at school, and online are a crucial to fostering digital citizenship and discouraging behaviors that could lead to cyberbullying. Based on the data gathered from school policies, school leaders, parents, and youth, we recommend the following action steps for establishing and improving collaborations, keeping youth safe from cyberbullying, and promoting digital citizenship:

- **Social media sites can play a prominent role in educating adults, both parents and school personnel, about the changing technology of social media, the negatives and positives of using social media, and the steps they can take to protect youth.** By engaging in outreach efforts to schools and parents, social media sites can emphasize their commitment to encouraging positive use of social media and preventing cyberbullying. Through innovative e-learning tools and site-sponsored pages geared specifically towards parents and schools, social media sites could keep these audiences updated regularly with the information and tools they need for primary monitoring and prevention. Social media sites should reach out to school and parent groups to market these tools and ensure that these are highly visible and readily available resources.

- **Stronger linkages between parents and schools, including additional outreach and educational efforts targeting parents, could help to reduce cyberbullying and lessen the burden on schools to investigate and address incidents.** Parents are looking to schools for guidance on how to keep their children safe. With the support of social media sites, schools could implement parent education initiatives that include concrete monitoring guidelines and up-to-date technology education.

- **Schools can take steps towards changing the culture around incident reporting so that both youth and their parents feel comfortable engaging school personnel.** They can do so by making the mechanisms of their investigations and responses more transparent, and by reaching out to youth and parents with messages about their commitment to supporting them, whether involved as victims, perpetrators, and/or bystanders.

- **Schools could benefit from the guidance of social media sites on how to incorporate the positive use of social media into classroom and extracurricular**

"Parents are the most responsible. But they aren't in the best position. School is great in terms of education, but the kids are so much more saavy. Networks need to step it up to make parents' jobs easier. They need to do more education because they have the technology and know-how."
– School Leader

activities. Social media sites could provide online/e-learning trainings to schools, as well as supporting materials, to be updated regularly so that school personnel can continue to learn about and take advantage of the newest advances in social media. Accompanying materials for parents could help the schools integrate social media while allowing parents to maintain appropriate oversight over their children's internet use.

- **Through collaborations across schools, administrators would benefit from learning about each other's strategies for reducing cyberbullying and addressing incidents.** Rather than struggling in isolation to determine the appropriate school-level policies, prevention initiatives, and intervention strategies, cross-districts partnerships and community coalitions, which could be implemented online or in-person, could facilitate sharing of best practices. Social network sites could play an important role in organizing and facilitating such collaborations.

- **Special efforts are needed to address the disproportionate level of cyberbullying that occurs among girls, LGBT youth, and youth with disabilities.** Educational efforts could target all youth with messages about respect and tolerance, and outreach efforts should target these vulnerable groups with messages of support and information on how to seek help if involved in cyberbullying. Additional staff training and parent outreach by schools could increase adults' awareness of the unique risks of these groups and provide appropriate resources.

- **Parents seek support in their efforts to set rules, monitor their children's internet use, and get help when their children are involved in cyberbullying.** Social norms messages, delivered by parent groups, schools, and social media sites, could reinforce positive parenting practices by showing them they are not alone in these efforts to protect their children and establishing new parenting norms.

- **Social media sites are well-positioned to take additional steps to prevent cyberbullying:**
  - Efforts targeted at youth could include reminder messages appearing on sites to encourage appropriate use, enforce age restrictions, encourage bystander intervention, and promote the use of incident reporting mechanisms. Sites could sponsor groups or "pages" that support positive behaviors, including bystander intervention, and allow teens to share positive online experiences.
  - Efforts targeted at parents could include education on effective parenting strategies, increased efforts to enforce site age restrictions, and regular educational messages to keep parents up-to-date with changing technologies.

"It's important to connect families in a digitally connected world. Parents need to connect and guarantee safety and monitoring, like when a child visits another child's house. We need to commit to each other as parents. This is a new challenge to our era."
– Parent

- o Efforts targeted at schools could guide them in promoting positive use of social media, educate them about online prevention and intervention strategies, and train them in responding appropriately to online bullying situations.

- **To effectively address cyberbullying <u>incidents</u> requires a trifold "response" that involves social media sites, parents, and schools.**
    - o Social media sites could increase their involvement by expanding the visibility of their efforts to address cyberbullying and providing better information on how these processes work, thereby encouraging victims and their families to take action online to stop victimization.
    - o Schools could improve their response by providing more clarity on the mechanisms through which they investigate and respond to incidents, and invoke disciplinary action, when necessary. In this way, youth and parents will perceive that schools are being responsive, and that their actions are effective.
    - o Parents could take greater responsibility for continually monitoring their children's Internet use to ensure that harmful situations do not persist. Support from schools and social networking sites would help to provide them with the tools they need to do this effectively.

- **Parents, schools, and social media sites have a combined responsibility for teaching youth about appropriate online behaviors and encouraging digital citizenship.**
    - o Parents have an important front-line role in actively monitoring their children's online behaviors and modeling positive use of social media.
    - o Schools are a crucial setting in which teaching of digital citizenship can be integrated into curriculum at every level from Kindergarten through high school.
    - o Social media sites are well-positioned to educate youth by utilizing online space to deliver messages that promote positive and appropriate behavior and emphasize the importance of using social media for sharing positive experiences and expanding digital citizenship among teens.

*   *   *

As teens' lives are being played out more and more on a digital backdrop, they are in need of education and guidance to stay safe at school, at home, and online. The linkages and collaborations recommended above emphasize the importance of bringing together schools, families, and social networking sites to tip the scale towards more positive use of social media among youth.

"The backbone of our approach is a continuous feedback loop involving staff, kids, administrators, our community coalition."
– School Leader

"Our entire district is constantly focused on building a community that respects each other and supports each other."
– School Leader

References

[1] U.S. Department of Education. Analysis of State Bullying Laws and Policies. Retrieved October 7, 2012 from http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/bullying/state-bullying-laws/state-bullying-laws.pdf.

[2] *An Act Relative to Bullying in Schools,* Chapter 92 of the Acts of 2010. Retrieved September 9, 2012 from http://www.malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2010/Chapter92.

[3] Education Development Center, Inc. Highlights from the 2010 MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey: MetroWest Region Middle School Report. Retrieved November 3, 2012 from http://www.mwhealth.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Public/Special_Reports/Adolescent_Health_Survey_Middle_School_2010.pdf.

[4] Education Development Center, Inc. Highlights from the 2010 MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey: MetroWest Region Middle School Report. Retrieved November 3, 2012 from http://www.mwhealth.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Public/Special_Reports/Adolescent_Health_Survey_High_School_2010.pdf.

[5] *An Act Relative to Bullying in Schools,* Chapter 92 of the Acts of 2010. Retrieved September 9, 2012 from http://www.malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2010/Chapter92.

Acknowledgements