

Good evening, everyone. I'm going to speak briefly about Cyberbullying as a phenomenon and Cyberbullying prevention strategies in the Great Neck Public Schools.

Many of you will remember that one of the original concerns surrounding the use of computers by children was that they would cause kids to be more socially isolated. The explosion of e-mail, Instant Messaging, cellular text messaging, message boards, blogs, file sharing, social networking sites, and Web cams have allayed those concerns and caused us to ask the exact opposite question. Given the importance teenagers give to their peer relationships, are they too social online for their own emotional health and physical safety, and if so, what can we do about it?

Humans are, by their very nature, social beings but interacting in Cyberspace is fundamentally different from the physical world in many ways. The same social cues and rules don't always apply online because the usual checks and balances don't exist. You aren't face to face. You can't read body language or judge nuance. You can be anonymous. You can impersonate someone else or pretend to be older than you really are. You can publish text, photos, and video for the entire world to see with positive or negative intent, and you can do all this at no cost, in real-time, and with little accountability. Things that kids would never say in person find their way online because Cyberbullies act with a presumed cloak of invisibility. They think they won't get caught, they think they have the right to post whatever they want regardless of the consequences, and they are removed from the tangible feedback resulting from their actions.

Cyberbullying is an outgrowth of these online norms and can be cruel, viscous, and emotionally harmful. It can manifest itself in the form of arguments, harassment, denigration, embarrassment, or exclusion. Once hurtful content is posted online, it can be saved, copied, distributed, or printed instantly, making it impossible to take back, and the emotional scars remain long after the incident is over. The advances in technology have served to make it simpler and faster for this harassment to occur, and the growth of the Internet as a mainstream medium for communication serves only to provide the Cyberbully with a wider audience and a broader reach.

The reality in Great Neck is that Cyberbullying rarely, if ever, originates from school. This is not an accident, it is the direct result of three key factors: 1) The foresight of the Board of Education as reflected in its Internet policies; 2) The filtering system we have chosen to use to enforce those policies; and 3) The vigilance and concern of the staff who work with our students every day.

The Board's policy on Computer Network and Internet Acceptable Use prevents Cyberbullying in our schools in many ways. First, the policy prohibits the personal use of the Internet including student e-mail. This key policy provision makes it clear to all users that the Internet is only to be used to enhance and support instruction and learning, and not to indulge one's personal life. Second, the policy prohibits unmediated online communications such as chat rooms, instant messaging, and message boards. Third, the policy mandates a filter to block illegal or inappropriate Web sites. Fourth, the policy authorizes the use of a filter bypass to investigate a student issue that relates to their health, safety, or well-being. Secondary administrators use the filter bypass to view message boards and social networking sites that are normally blocked, such as MySpace and Facebook, to investigate Cyberbullying claims.

The Board's policy on District-Sponsored Internet Publishing also prevents Cyberbullying in school. The policy prohibits the posting of student last names or photographs that visually identify students. While the policy does not prevent students from creating Web pages because it is part of our curriculum, it does prohibit students from uploading those pages. This ensures that students cannot change content directly on the Web without authorization and review. Lastly, the policy prohibits us from linking to personal Web sites because they contain content that the district cannot control.

Given these precautions, one might assume Cyberbullying is not a major problem in Great Neck. That is not the case. Cyberbullying occurs outside of school and spills over into the life of the school, and when this happens, it can be disruptive and hurtful. One attempt to combat this occurs at South High, where we developed an anonymous feedback form which allows any user to report an incident that they are not comfortable coming forward about.

Another way in which we combat Cyberbullying is through the curriculum. Our library and computer programs include lessons about Internet Safety, responsible online netiquette, and judging the validity of online content. In some instances, students are presented with Cyberbully scenarios and asked to give their reaction which elicits discussion and raises awareness.

In addition, the district considers staff and parent education an important aspect of Cyberbullying prevention. Our Web site has information and links to Internet Safety guidelines in the home. School PTA meetings over the years have been devoted to this topic. In the past, we have brought renowned speakers in this field into the district to speak to the staff and the parent community, including Parry Aftab, a Cyberspace lawyer and founder of Cyberangels.org, an organization that is devoted to helping keep children safe online. Most recently, two public forums sponsored by the UPTC and our PTAs, were offered to raise awareness of the parents' role in keeping their children safe while online at home. One was targeted at our elementary parents and presented by district staff just last week, and the other was targeted at our high school students and secondary parents and was presented by William Pelgrin, the director of the New York State Office of Cyber Security.

Cyberbullying exists nationally, it exists on Long Island, and it exists in Great Neck. Schools and parents must take control of the technology and be proactively involved in what children do online, impose limits, expect responsibility, demand accountability, and keep the lines of communication open. Cyberbullying is a new take on an age-old problem. It is a manifestation of real-world bullying but has its own unique characteristics that we must understand in order to combat effectively. We must be vigilant both in school and at home to be sure we know what our children are doing online and not always assume that they are doing the right thing. It is important to trust our children, but it is even more important to teach them, to supervise them, to protect them, and to let them know that Cyberbullying is totally unacceptable and will not be tolerated here.