

A Tangled



The Internet is forging an information and generation gap between kids and adults. Are you doing what's necessary to keep students safe and savvy?

Naomi Dillon

Credit her siblings, all of whom make a living in technology, or her natural inquisitiveness, but Cathy Scolpini wasn't one of those adults who had to be dragged into the information age.

"I guess I didn't want to be left behind," says Scolpini, the lead instructional technology teacher for Virginia's Pittsylvania County Schools.

That was in the late 1990s, and all Scolpini had to worry about was teaching the staff the basics: how to use Microsoft Office, the Internet, and various other software programs. Now her task is far more complex.

Today, Web-savvy kids are trying anything and everything to connect to their peers, but are not aware of the dangers that lurk in online communities. Teachers and, to a lesser extent, parents are not as facile with the new technology, and are hard pressed to keep tabs on what kids are doing.

For schools, it's a 21st century information and generation

gap—and it's growing as fast as a computer virus.

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 94 percent of U.S. households now have access to the Internet, a figure that has risen from 73 percent since 2000. A 2007 study by Grunwald Associates and the National School Boards Association said 96 percent of students with online access use social networking technologies, such as chatting, text messaging, blogging, and visiting online communities such as Facebook and MySpace. That's twice as many as adults, according to Pew.

"I think most districts make sure there are protections in place," says Ed Zaiontz, chair elect of the Consortium for School Networking, an assembly of state and district technology leaders. "But we're only as good as what we know today. This is a changing medium and we have to be comfortable with the fact that things could change next year, next month."

School districts like Pittsylvania County are trying to stop the gap by focusing on Internet safety, offering classes to stu-

Web



As the lead instructional technology teacher at Pittsylvania County Schools in Virginia, Cathy Scolpini not only shows students but also their teachers how to use the Internet wisely.

dents, teachers, and parents. But the information overload is often overwhelming.

“It is difficult for parents and teachers to keep up with the rapid changes and stay well-informed,” says Jace Shoemaker-Galloway, a computer technician with Illinois’ Macomb Community Unit School District and the chair of the district’s online safety team. “Our laws, policies, and initiatives are also struggling to keep up. Many of the issues we are facing are new.”

Social networking risks, rewards

Social networking—the land of MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter—is the newest technology phenomenon, a sequel of sorts to instant messaging and texting and a generation removed from e-mail. Taking advantage of Web 2.0 technology that allows members to communicate instantly with a large group of friends and coworkers, the tool has great potential for helping educators do their jobs.

In fact, the Grunwald/NSBA study said 60 percent of students talk about education topics online. Somewhat surprisingly, more than half talk specifically about school work, a key number that prompted the study’s authors to urge school districts to re-examine policies so that social networking can be used for educational purposes.

At the same time, many teens are by their very nature—and level of maturity—impulsive. Because technology is moving so fast, they are using the tools and not taking the time to become savvy about digital literacy.

“Teens are facile with technology but not fluent with the new literacies the digital world requires,” says Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet and American Life Project. “We see among teens an imbalance in their approach to life. They are wildly enthusiastic about being out there and getting noticed ... much less concerned about what that kind of personal disclosure means.”

And the risks of such openness are high. From sexual

predators and hate groups to harassment and infamy, kids can become targets or perpetrators in a medium that offers the illusion of anonymity and very often the absence of adult supervision.

Risky business

Drink tons of water. Hot water makes you feel full. Cold water lowers the body temperature and helps you burn calories. Take a sip between tiny bites of food; chew for a prescribed number of times. Between meals, nosh on sugar-free gum or mints, it keeps your mouth active and masks bad breath if you have ketosis.

These are just some of the tips found on so-called pro-eating disorder sites, online communities that have been criticized for promoting bulimia and anorexia as a lifestyle. Though the sites' owners insist it is a place of support and understanding for those battling with the illness, most protesters don't see how providing advice on ways to lose weight and stay thin is helpful.

Eating disorders, suicide, hate groups, steroid use, cutting, promiscuity, gangs. Name the harmful and hurtful activity and it's found a place online.

"Whatever area in whatever way a young person's risk is manifesting in the real world, they will and have found an

online community to engage with other young people in the same risk behavior," says Nancy Willard, a former educator, lawyer, and researcher on the topic of youth social behavior online.

Unfortunately, the Internet provides not just another forum to these groups, but another element.

"Whereas before, you had a troublesome group of four or five kids who just aren't fitting in, today that's multiplied," Willard says. "And that's what risk prevention people call contagion."

Indeed, the hallmarks of the Internet—speed and reach—have accelerated and given a new dimension to long-time social ills like bigotry and gang activity. A recent U.S. Justice Department survey found that gangs are using social networking sites to expand their drug operations, boast about their exploits, and recruit new members, some as young as 8 years old. Police have even given this updated menace a new name: Net banging.

Bullies and vulnerable kids

Whoever said sticks and stones don't break your bones probably said it before the advent of the Internet. Gossip, intimidation, and threats can be deadly in the digital age.

Students who are looking for attention are more easily manipulated and more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior online. Willard says they are less likely to effectively engage parents, have helpful friends, and know how to get out of difficult situations. Generally distrustful of adults, they are far less likely to report problems and think they will get into trouble for engaging in unsafe behavior.

"I tell parents, balance out the relationships your children supposedly have on the computer with those in real life, through sports and clubs," Scolpini says. "The kids who really get into those online relationships are the ones that are most vulnerable. 'I have 275 friends but I don't know 270 of them.'"

The vulnerability is compounded by the rise in cyberbullying, a form of online taunting that encompasses the same behaviors as its school yard counterpart. The use of modern technology has heightened these behaviors, emboldening perpetrators with a cloak of invisibility and a lack of external cues. And the results have sometimes proven tragic.

In 2003, Ryan Patrick Halligan, a 13-year-old Vermont middle school student, committed suicide after suffering years of torment and harassment from classmates questioning his sexual orientation. The taunts were found to have continued online in chat rooms and instant messages. In a widely publicized case last summer, an eighth-grade girl from Dardenne, Mo., committed suicide after a former friend's mother allegedly tormented her online by masquerading as a "boyfriend" with a fake MySpace account.

Those are extreme examples, but a 2007 National Crime Prevention Council survey found 43 percent of youth reported being cyberbullied in the last year. Though that figure has been higher, especially among high school students, a star-

Striking the balance

Here are some ways that school board members could strike the appropriate balance between protecting students and providing a 21st century education:

Explore social networking sites. See and try out the kinds of creative communications and collaboration tools that students are using so your perceptions and decisions about these tools are based on real experiences.

Consider using social networking for staff communications and professional development. In districts where structured online professional communities exist, participation by teachers and administrators is quite high.

Find ways to harness the educational value of social networking. Some schools and educators are experimenting successfully with chat rooms, instant messaging, blogs, wikis, and more for after-school homework help, review sessions, and collaborative projects, for example.

Ensure equitable access. Most students have some way to get online, either in their schools, at public libraries, or at home. But educators need to consider the ways to make the access readily available to low income students who do not have computers at home.

Adapted from Creating & Connecting: Research and Guidelines on Online Social—and Educational—Networking, published in 2007 by Grunwald Associates and the National School Boards Association.

ting 52 percent said they have been the victim or culprit of cyberbullying, according to a recent study by i-Safe, a congressionally funded Internet safety organization.

Whatever the statistic, nearly everyone agrees cyberbullying is a growing problem that requires serious attention. Earlier this year, California passed one of the first laws in the country that gives school administrators the power to punish students who bully others in person or online. Meanwhile, more and more districts have rewritten bullying policies to include its online equivalent.

Unfortunately, these corrective measures only address part of the problem, says Shoemaker-Galloway.

“Most cyberbullying does not occur on school grounds,” she says. “But attempting to regulate off-campus behavior that can negatively impact students and faculty can be tricky, legally.”

The legal conundrum

In 2007, a federal judge ruled that a Pennsylvania school district was outside its boundaries when it suspended senior Justin Layshock for creating an online parody of his principal. The ruling, which is being appealed by the district, said the district violated Layshock’s First Amendment rights.

Nearly a decade earlier, a federal court in eastern Missouri used the same logic to reverse the charges against Brandon Beussink, a student who created a website from home that used vulgar language to criticize the school and staff.

School officials have won some cases, however. In 2000, a Pennsylvania math teacher sued a student for creating a graphic website that showed her with a severed head and asked for money to place a hit on her. The court awarded the teacher, who took a leave of absence, \$500,000 for defamation and invasion of privacy. More recently, North Carolina’s Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools pressed charges against a student who posted a message on Facebook suggesting one of his teachers was a pedophile.

While both online activities occurred at home, district officials made their cases by proving one of two things: that the posting caused substantial disruption to the rights of students or to school operations (the standard set by *Tinker v. Des Moines*) or a direct connection, or school nexus, exists between what appeared online and what happened at school.

“When it comes to cyberbullying committed off-campus, there are two more legal questions worth watching closely,” says NSBA Senior Staff Attorney Thomas Hutton. “The first is what kind of connection to school will be deemed sufficient to justify school intervention. Given what we know about the impact bullying can have on a child’s ability to function well in school, and given the impact even one child’s test scores can have on the whole school in this high-stakes world, the First Amendment bar may be lowered a bit.

However, Hutton cautions, “there’s a potential liability trade-off for schools asserting broad authority over off-campus cyberbullying. In other contexts schools can be held

liable for failing to protect students from harassment by their peers. You want to think twice about exposing yourself to a potential lawsuit claiming the school has a legal duty to prevent cyberbullying off campus. There are limits to schools’ ability to police the Internet.”

Establishing safety

Pittsylvania County decided to teach online safety courses to its students in 2005 “because we felt it was necessary,” says Ricky Parker, the assistant superintendent of technology for the district. “It just seemed to us a matter of good diligence.”

Pulling it off, however, was not easy.

Scolpini researched and vetted many Internet safety programs, drawing from the best, weaving them into Virginia’s standards of learning, and tailoring them to each grade level. But while the technology department received broad support for the initiative from superintendent James McDaniel and the school board, not everyone was thrilled with the time commitment.

“In the beginning, teachers would not stay in the classrooms with the kids,” Scolpini says. “It was like, ‘Oh good, this is another planning time.’”

The following year, teachers were required to participate and take an online professional development course on Internet safety. Parents also have been brought into the fold, with online safety classes and common sense advice from Scolpini.

By 2006, when Virginia became the first state to make online safety instruction for students mandatory, Pittsylvania had a huge head start.

“I was just glad that for once we were a little bit ahead,” Scolpini says.

In September, each of the state’s school systems was required to submit an updated acceptable use policy that included the Internet safety component. Tammy McGraw, the education technology director for the state department of education, says guidance documents and resources drawn from leading experts in the field have been provided to districts, but not actual lesson plans.

“We didn’t want to be in the business of creating a curriculum, of saying, ‘This is it,’” McGraw says. The technology and the issues surrounding it are too complex and too fluid for a prescription, she adds.

Of course, there are fundamentals, she says. Students need to know not all online material is valid or appropriate, though what’s considered valid or appropriate may change daily. Obviously material like pornography has no place in schools, but that’s not a gray area, McGraw says.

“We know what we are dealing with there,” she says. “It’s questions like, ‘How far do we allow social networking?’ and ‘What are the benefits of letting kids participate and collaborate with others online?’ that are the more difficult ones.” ■

Naomi Dillon (ndillon@nsba.org) is a senior editor of *American School Board Journal*.