

How one Iowa school district catches bullies

Kyle Munson (Des Moines Register)

Two and a half years ago, several high school girls at East Union Community Schools in Afton were caught cyberbullying through Facebook. It had escalated until one of the girls told administrators that she wanted to drop out of school. That infuriated Superintendent Pam Vogel. "We are not going to have kids wanting to leave school because they feel so ostracized by their peers," she said.

Vogel noted in The Register's bullying investigation published earlier this month that her district of 500 or so students ended up among the top 10 Iowa public school districts according to per capita reported bullying incidents in the last five years. She phoned to chat about it. (More: The Register's Iowa bullying investigation: All the links in one handy blog post.)

Our Register database of bullying incidents was built from data that the state has acknowledged to be deeply inconsistent and incomplete in the wake of Iowa's 2007 anti-bullying law. So I told Vogel that her district's high ranking most likely is a good thing; East Union seems to have been reporting bullying more thoroughly and in the spirit of the law than the vast majority of districts.

Vogel outlined how the Facebook incident prompted more aggressive bullying prevention efforts in her classrooms. "I've been standing on the soapbox about this," she said.

East Union has implemented the widely popular Olweus anti-bullying curriculum. Middle school and high school students receive a new anti-bullying lesson in their homerooms each week. And each homeroom currently is in the middle of a contest to see which can create the best anti-bullying video.

But there's also this fascinating glimpse of how even small, rural districts such as East Union are attempting to thwart bullies with some of the newest technology available.

East Union is among the growing number of "one-to-one" districts in which all students in grades 6 through 12 are issued laptop computers and provided with Google-based email and document sharing. In a sense, that proliferates the opportunities for cyberbullying, since students' access to social media isn't restricted on the computers, and parents must monitor use at home.

But East Union also has implemented a "Human Monitoring Service (HMS)" from technology provider Gaggle.net based in Bloomington, Ill. The HMS essentially data-scrapes the school server to monitor email and chats for hate speech, sexual language and other warning signs. (Activity on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter can't be captured by HMS, but of course parents, again, remain a crucial part of the equation.)

Students "receive an email stating that they are being warned of the inappropriate chat, email, or language in their document," the district's technology director, Lori Paup, explained in an email. "The administration are cc'd on this warning email as well. If the infraction is life-threatening, a phone call from Gaggle's HMS is received by the superintendent."

So Vogel has received actual phone calls from out of state that provided the first warning to her district that a potential threat was brewing.

In one serious example that goes beyond bullying, two high school boys were involved in rape threats against a high school girl and had their computers confiscated, among other punishments.

Another recent HMS catch revealed the bullying of a middle school boy at school, with the added revelation that the bullying stemmed from an incident over the summer when he had been assaulted at a birthday party. Not even the victim's parents were aware of the assault or bullying until East Union's computer monitoring prompted a meeting.

"We are definitely reporting (bullying) accurately, as accurately as we can," Vogel said. East Union, she added, is "doing something about it — facing it head on" and "trying to change kids' behaviors."

Munson, K. (2012, October 25). *How one Iowa school district catches bullies*. Des Moines Register. Retrieved October 31, 2012, from <http://abetterIowa.desmoinesregister.com>