

# **The Schools' Response to Online Bullying**

by

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## Introduction

A menace is lurking on the world wide web and its impact is reaching far into our schools. Millions of students are teased and bullied every day in the United States, and most teachers and parents are not completely aware of the extent to which these incidents occur. A recent Bureau of Justice study estimates that every 7 minutes a child is bullied. Adult intervention occurs in only 4% of these incidents, peer intervention in 11%, and no intervention in 85%. And today's new online youth culture allows attacks on other students that are even more hidden from those who might intervene on their behalf. In part, due to youth often being more savvy with the Internet than adults, online bullying is becoming yet another means of student hurting student with little retribution for victims, particularly in the schools. The following article aims to examine the various components of online bullying and hate crimes. In doing this, educators, caregivers, and parents are encouraged to develop skills that aid in identifying online hate strategies, work toward defusing their impact, and provide the means for empowering youth in building media literacy skills to critically analyze online materials and advocate for their fellow students that are victims (Leets, 2001).

The Internet is a unique and inexpensive medium with the power to reach a mass audience. For those reasons it is increasingly being used to promote hate. While the Internet may be less intrusive than other mass media, it does incorporate elements of print, broadcast, and face-to-face interaction in its conveyance of messages to its audience (Leets, 2001). Cyberhate sites are a vehicle to promote and encourage online bullying, but are not the only instigators of such activity. Internet hate-motivated activities may be associated with any of the following actions, activities or events: use of derogatory symbols or words; direct or indirect threats to groups; posting or circulating of demeaning jokes based on negative stereotypes; destroying of posted materials, meeting places, or memorials of particular groups; prior history of similar crimes; acts following specific holidays or events; and access to and/or usage of hate group literature on the web or in print (Prutzman, 1994).

## Legal Issues

The United States is somewhat unique in its protection of hate speech, whereas France, Germany, Sweden, and Canada have national laws criminalizing hate messages. In these countries, hate site developers can be prosecuted and their sites can be permanently removed. The United States Supreme Court regulates speech when it presents clear and imminent damage, presents fighting words or obscene speech, defamation, or presents false or deceptive advertising (Leets, 2001). The Supreme Court to date has not equated Internet media with television media influence and, therefore, places less focus on detrimental Internet influences. According to this rationale, a person must actively search for information, though not necessarily hate-motivated material, in order to be exposed to cyberhate messages and images (Leets, 2001). Additionally within the context of the United States' media history, less regulation and control exists in some cases due to the sheer novelty of Internet media and its progressive expansion and development.

While online hate group activity is a real and relevant development in many schools, the Internet simply provides yet another venue for bullying behaviors, which cannot be tolerated in the educational environment. According to the Center for Advanced Technology in Oregon (2002), the school's response to online hate messages and bullying should correspond with their existing, but ever-changing anti-bullying policies. While students maintain rights to free speech under their constitutional rights, school district Internet services are provided for educational purposes, and are, therefore, considered a limited forum. Comparison may be made to a school publication where the school maintains complete editorial control. The district Internet system is most often

identified via the district domain name. In turn, this suggests that all speech, even private messages, are being sent under the auspices of the district name and are subject to regulation. Districts that do not clearly define the educational purpose of Internet services create a public forum for their students, which may limit the district's ability to take action against students involved in online bullying activities. Educationally-based restrictions can include criminal speech, speech that can cause harm to another individual or group, speech that is inappropriate in an educational setting or violates district rules, inappropriate language, dangerous information, violations of privacy, abuse of Internet-based resources, copyright infringement or plagiarism, or violations of personal safety. Educational officials cannot limit student speech based on viewpoint discrimination alone.

Districts that cannot legally discipline students for off-campus speech should recognize that these actions signal important school climate concerns. Educators should recognize that the perpetrator of off-campus harmful speech may be a victim of on-campus bullying. The perpetrator of online bullying is, in a sense, insulated by technology. School staff may need to utilize strategies to encourage student and parent acknowledgement of the gravity of harmful circumstances caused online bullying. If warranted, victims should be assisted regarding their legal rights in bringing civil action suits on perpetrators. District staff may be able to file formal complaints with the Internet Service Provider (ISP) hosting the website or email through which online hate speech was transmitted (Responsible Netizen, 2002).

### Definitions

In order to examine Internet hate-motivated messages and bullying, it is important to acknowledge existing counteractive organization's definitions of what constitutes hate-motivated activity in general. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) defines hate-motivated incidents as "an expression of hostility against a person or property because of race, religion, nationality, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Actions motivated by bias, but that do not involve necessary elements to prove a crime are also included in this definition (i.e., name-calling, using racial slurs, developing or sending online hate messages, or disseminating racist leaflets). Protected classification varies across states. Actual hate crimes are classified under specific penal code sections as acts that include, but are not limited to, the following examples: threatening phone calls, hate mail (including emails), physical assaults, vandalism, cross burning, destruction of religious symbols, and fire bombings" (ADL, 2002).

### Growth of the Culture

Since 1980, the recorded number of hate-motivated incidents throughout society has been increasing (Prutzman, 1994). Correspondingly, hate web sites are being utilized more each day to recruit youth to their organizations. The growth of the web as an effective and far-reaching communication tool and the simultaneous and potent youth involvement in web culture combine to create avenues for hate-driven messages, bullying, intimidation, and action. The Simon Wiesenthal Center (2000) has estimated that more than 3,000 web sites contain messages of hate, racism, terrorist agendas, and bomb-making instructions. In 1995, only one such website existed (Lee & Leets, 2002). According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), most hate crimes are committed by youth, but not all perpetrators are associated with hate groups (Blazak, 2001). The Southern Poverty Law Center reported that 47% of hate sites are not affiliated with organized hate groups. Many sites are utilized as gateways to established hate groups (Blazak, 2001).

### NEA Stance

To facilitate direction and focus for the public schools' stance on hate crime, Internet-based and otherwise, the National Education Association (NEA) supports federal the development of legislation that promotes federal involvement in crimes directed toward individuals or groups

regarding race, color, religion, national origin, gender, disability, or sexual orientation. Unfortunately, current federal laws do not allow for intervention in hate crime incidents based on racial or religious bias unless it occurs under the umbrella of federally-protected activity. Additionally, no federal authority is authorized with regard to hate crime activity based on sexual orientation, gender, or disability. Partnership between local educational agencies and community-based organizations is imperative in reducing bias-motivated violence in our schools and communities. The NEA recommends continued federal funding of anti-hate school programs and services, and efforts toward more comprehensive hate crime legislation (NEA, 2002).

At a local level, the following suggestions are presented for districts and schools to begin to address hate-motivated behavior in the school community (ADL, 2002).

1. Establish an anti-violence task force for quick response to hate incidents/crimes
2. Educate school staff to recognize the signs of hate-motivated incidents/crimes
3. Establish school policies that do not tolerate hate-motivated behavior
4. Report to law enforcement
5. Conduct a thorough investigation, with law enforcement guidance and direction, of the incidents accessing multiple perspectives. (interviews of victim(s), perpetrator(s), and witnesses; take pictures, collect literature, block site(s) on school computers)
6. Be aware of and know how to access referral sources in the community
7. Establish discipline protocol within the individual school and school district
8. Provide incident report for the district and provide information for the KDE Safe Schools Database
9. Follow-up activities (e.g., send notices to parents/caregivers and other concerned parties, staff & students awareness activities, responses to the media, etc.)

A crucial component of addressing online hate-motivated bullying in the schools is assessment of motivation behind actions (ADL, 2002). Without examining student motivation thoroughly, prevention and intervention efforts will be misguided and could harm efforts to prevent future hate-motivated activities. Staff is encouraged to consider the following factors in their prevention and intervention efforts with all students, whether affected directly or indirectly by online bullying:

1. Words, symbols, or acts utilized
2. Differing group dynamics (perpetrator vs. victim)
3. Pre-existing tension or hostility (both school & community climate)
4. Demographic & social profile of surrounding area
5. Recent moves into the area
6. Multiple incidents
7. School, district, & community response
8. Timing (i.e., coinciding with holidays, anniversaries of events, etc.)
9. Either victim(s) or perpetrator(s) public activity/involvement in controversial events or action
10. News coverage influence
11. Manner & means of attack, possible similarity to other events (not necessarily coincidental)
12. Ongoing neighborhood or school community problems
13. Perpetrator(s) understanding of impact of act on others (i.e., expression of empathy, apology)
14. Involvement with an organized hate group (identified signs & symbols, degree of professionalism in efforts may indicate outside support from organized hate groups)

## Research

The influence of cyberhate on children and adolescents is an area of little research (Leets, 2001). Of primary concern is that many adolescents take Internet content at face value as credible and reliable. This speaks to a need for more preventative action supporting the development of critical thinking skills in the early years (Lee & Leets, 2001). Educators must develop curricula that incorporates components of recognition and evaluation of the mainstream media and the propaganda associated with it. As for adolescent hate web site developers and students who transmit hate messages online, there are a multitude of psychological and environmental factors that play into why they engage in such bullying behavior. Adolescents typically experience feelings of alienation and struggle with their personal identity throughout the teen years. These feelings may lead to a sense of rootlessness or normlessness that can be filled through group identity, whether acceptable or unacceptable in general society. Adolescents may join hate groups and assume associated identities that in a maladaptive manner help reduce this anxiety and alienation (Blazak, 2001). It is important to note that much of the online hate activity promoted by adolescents may not be directly associated with hate groups, but the influence of organized activities cannot be ignored.

## Strategies

Programs that have been deemed as utilizing effective strategies in the battle against hate crime are programs that focus on cooperation, communication, affirmation, conflict resolution, problem solving, mediation, and bias awareness (Prutzman, 1994). Essentially, these programs are similar, if not the same programs deemed effective against bullying related to any violent behavior. Anti-Bias Education can incorporate an anti-violence climate and support the development of individual responsible citizenship within the school community. Changing demographics, economic disparity, and societal tensions often contribute to fear, distrust, and anger in individuals that do not possess the knowledge or skills to operate in a pluralistic society. In order to address the lack of these knowledge and skills, in 1993, the United States Department of Justice and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention presented grant funds the Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) to development hate crime prevention curricula. *Healing the Hate: A National Hate Crime Prevention Curriculum for Middle Schools* is based in violence prevention and prejudice reduction research; profiles of hate crime offenders and victims; multidisciplinary advisory teams in education, juvenile justice, and community-based youth programming; and rigorous field testing in demographically and geographically diverse educational settings. Each lesson examines beliefs and attitudes about violence and prejudice, addresses issues of diversity with students in their community, and examines the role of contributing factors (media and institutional prejudice) in perpetuating hate crimes. The curriculum is based on the principles that violence and prejudice are preventable, early education and intervention are crucial components, empathy building, awareness and appreciation of differences, cooperative learning, critical thinking, perspective taking, media literacy, interactivity, inequality and institutional violence and prejudice, and social responsibility (EDC, 2002).

It is imperative to emphasize that teachers' responses to bias and hate speech must not consist of ignoring or minimizing verbal or written bullying, but instead should encourage and facilitate discussion around these issues with all involved (Prutzman, 1994). If a teacher is uncomfortable in such a role, guidance counselors, school psychologists, or community mental health professionals should be consulted with and be involved either indirectly or directly in anti-bias education efforts. Additionally, to directly address exposure to hate sites, filtering software can be utilized within the controlled school setting and, in the home, parents may be encouraged to pursue these resources as well.

A key component for combating online hate is providing students the opportunities to build media literacy skills to critically analyze online materials across content areas. As technology develops and expands, the mass media becomes the dominant storyteller in our society. Media often frames stories in ways that appear absolute, providing only limited, one-sided perspectives on topics. Adolescents, without good critical thinking skills, can be easily influenced by these messages and perpetuate myths, stereotypes, and discriminatory actions that threaten their peers and others. To prevent and counteract this influence, educators must aid their students as they evaluate the impact of major social movements (i.e., women, racial minorities, youth, etc.) and guide their students step-by-step in perspective-taking across cultural and social boundaries. These efforts can be supported through guided discussion of videos, newspapers, magazines, Internet sites, and other mediums of mass media. Viewing online materials through a lens of knowledge can balance one-sided messages and potentially provide initiative for students to support and eventually advocate for one another's differences (National Council for the Social Studies, 2002).

### Conclusion

A white supremacist who has utilized the Internet as a communication tool of his organization made the following comments about the Internet, "All of this has had a pretty profound effect on a movement whose resources are limited...with the phenomenal growth of the Internet, tens of millions of people have access to our message...the access is anonymous and there is unlimited ability to communicate others of a like mind (Becker, Byers, & Jipson, 2000)." In response to such efforts, anti-hate promoters can present factual and historical information about specifically targeted groups to encourage better understanding and promote diversity. School staff, caregivers, and parents must recognize that hate-motivated activity could potentially be promoted within their own homes and schools by students. Awareness and organized, educated responses are key in addressing these concerns. It is crucial that educators, caregivers, and parents learn to identify hate group strategies, work toward defusing their impact, and provide the means for empowering adolescents in building media literacy skills to critically analyze online materials (Leets, 2001).

### References

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