



BULLY PULPIT

Bullies have moved from the schoolyard to cyberspace—and the consequences can be tragic. Can Seattle Public Schools' new curriculum curb these vicious attacks? **BY ELIZABETH M. ECONOMOU**

DURING THE SUMMER OF 2005, Callum Dickson, then 14 and a student at a Kirkland school, refused to go along with friends who wanted to bully a classmate. To his surprise, Dickson became a target of cyberbullying. "It happened out of the blue," says the 18-year-old Dickson, recalling the time when he logged on to the social networking site MySpace and found a "We Hate Callum" group. "The online bullying was not just confined to MySpace," says Dickson's outraged mother, Stephanie Dickson, "but text and verbal messages as well." As the harassment persisted, Dickson pleaded with his parents to let him change schools. Though reluctant at first, they eventually agreed to a transfer to BEST High School, also in Kirkland. ¶ This is just the kind of incident that Seattle Public Schools' new cyberbullying prevention curriculum for middle school and junior high school students is aimed at tackling through education and awareness. Today, cyberbullying affects more than 30 percent of students across the nation, according to the Pew Research Center. Cyberbullies act by sending threatening emails, posting damaging photos of others online without their consent, and spreading hurtful rumors on social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook. The abuse may be an extension of something that's already going on at school or it may be carried out entirely online. It's especially ominous because it can occur 24/7. And because it exists in cyberspace, it can haunt and taunt forever.

While cyberbullying doesn't discriminate between genders, girls are more likely than boys to be the cyberbullies, according to Seattle Police Detective Malinda Wilson, who is part of the department's Internet Crimes Against Children Unit. Teenagers who are more transparent with their online identities are also more vulnerable than those who are less active online. And students with low self-esteem or those with little or no support networks are more likely to be targeted. Dr. Sameer Hinduja, a national expert in the expanding field of cyberbullying and co-author of *Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying*, notes that the immense social pressures of the early teen years leave this group more susceptible to cyberbullying. "Middle school is a very difficult, impressionable time when youth are figuring out their boundaries, beliefs, goals and roles," he says. "They are tremendously susceptible to harm stemming from peer harassment, offline and online."

Gina Gerlitz, who teaches eighth-grade language arts and social studies at Hamilton International Middle School in Wallingford, knows how ubiquitous cyberbullying is. "[Students] combat the whole bullying thing on a daily basis, and if they don't have the tools to deal with it appropriately, it's a cycle that'll repeat itself year after year," she says. A seasoned educator, Gerlitz has embraced the district's recent cyberbullying prevention curriculum roll-out, one of the first of its kind.

The brainchild of Mike Donlin, senior program consultant for the district's prevention-intervention department—committed to creating safe and secure learning environments—the cyberbullying prevention curriculum is a treasure trove for teachers like Gerlitz who hope to arm middle and junior high school students against the insidious and rising tide of cyberbullying.

Donlin says the need to add a cyberbullying component to the district's existing Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) became apparent in 2004 when he was training teachers and administrators in OBPP, which is aimed at reducing bullying problems and improving relations in all district schools. "[Cyberbullying] became such a pervasive undercurrent

that I realized we had a problem," he says. While working with different school teams, says Donlin, the "Internet stuff" kept resurfacing. "It's the kind of thing that's hard to deal with because adults, by and large, don't enter the cyberworld."

Until recently, cyberbullying had assumed a back seat to other Internet issues such as identity theft, online predators and addictive gaming behaviors. But the high-profile 2006 suicide of 13-year-old Megan Meier (from a small town in Missouri), which has been attributed to cyberbullying via MySpace, plucked cyberbullying out of relative obscurity and onto the radar screens of teachers and administrators in Seattle and throughout the country.

At her school, Gerlitz says the most pervasive type of cyberbullying occurs via text messaging or MySpace, noting that though many middle school students aren't old enough to register for the Web site (which has an age requirement of 14), many lie about their age.

No one really knows how pervasive cyberbullying is locally, but Detective Wilson, who is the mother of a teenage

son, says the trend is growing. Sitting in front of computer screens all day, kids are simply out of touch with the human factor. "They're losing empathy and a sense of responsibility," she says, adding, "Puberty, privacy and the Internet should not be allowed in the same room." One measure of how common cyberbullying is becoming can be seen in the efforts of a local theater company. Taproot Theatre's recent play *New Girl*—for grades six through 12—tries to teach students the tragic ramifications of sending or posting insulting or threatening messages on the

world. "The kid's major fear is that they're going to lose everything if the computer is taken away, and then they feel as though... their world is gone."

Meanwhile, Donlin—who notes that awareness and development of empathy is key to prevention—knows that getting kids' attention is the challenge of any prevention program. It's a challenge that Gerlitz willingly takes on. Since last September, Gerlitz has introduced nearly 60 students to the cyberbullying prevention curriculum (which currently is optional for teachers). The affable, 40-something

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Internet or via other electronic devices. From the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year through April, the Greenwood-based theater's touring company performed *New Girl* 48 times at schools for more than 19,000 students, teachers and administrators.

Though reaching out to students and teachers is important, Gerlitz knows it's also critical for parents to be part of the solution by acquainting themselves with sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, just as they get to know whom their kids associate with in the real world. "It's a crazy place to visit, and I don't want to live there," says Gerlitz, "but adults with kids need to become familiar with what their children are exposed to and putting on there." McClure Middle School principal Sarah J. Pritchett is more direct. "There should be no privacy when it comes to computer use or phone use," she says. She exhorts parents to know all passwords, to randomly check their kids' phone messages, and to place all computers in a common area, not in bedrooms. Donlin, however, cautions that parents should not curtail online usage if their son or daughter expresses that they've been cyberbullied. For many kids, their computer or phone is a lifeline to their social

teacher tries to weave a cyberbullying lesson into her writing workshop or as part of a social studies unit at least once or twice a month. "The thing with cyberbullying," she says, "if you don't have good relationships with your students, they aren't going to talk to you about it."

For many of her students, bullying and cyberbullying are a part of life, says Gerlitz. "Some of them come in thinking that bullying is something that you have to live through because it makes you stronger. And I can't convince all of them that it's not a rite of passage." Nonetheless, Gerlitz lauds the fact that potential cyberbullies are learning from the new curriculum that there are consequences if they are caught. "It really touches their lives," she says of the cyberbullying prevention curriculum.

As for Callum Dickson, he has poured himself into his passion—playing rock music—and will soon be studying sound engineering at Shoreline Community College before heading off to Berklee College of Music in Boston. Changing schools turned out to be the right move for him. But if the cyberbullying curriculum is successful, others may be spared having to make such a choice. **S**

Bullies and Schools

In 2004, the Washington State Legislature approved a bill requiring school districts to adopt an anti-bullying curriculum, and in 2007 added a requirement for electronic bullying prevention. The cyberbullying curriculum adopted by Seattle Public Schools offers comprehensive lessons that include discussion and homework assignments on topics ranging from "What to Do If You Are Being Cyberbullied" to "What to Do If You're a Cyberbully." The curriculum, funded via grants from Qwest Communications/Qwest Foundation and the SPS district's prevention-intervention program, is free and available to anyone who wants it. It's been well received by parents and teachers in Seattle, says the district's Mike Donlin, who notes that he's also received interest in it from school districts and educational service districts in Arizona, Colorado, Oregon, Michigan, California, New York, New Jersey and Iowa. **E. E.**