

# Tucson Citizen

## Denogean: Schools trying to catch up with cyberbullying

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Megan Meier was 13 and riddled with more than the usual insecurities and vulnerabilities that come with the age.

The Missouri girl, who struggled with weight issues and depression, committed suicide by hanging on Oct. 16, 2006, shortly after a cute boy ended their online friendship with messages that said everybody hated her and the world would be a better place without her.

Steve Pokin of the St. Charles (Mo.) Journal uncovered the story behind Megan's suicide earlier this month, including this shocker: There was no boy. The online friend was the invention of an adult, the mother of a girl with whom Megan recently had a falling out.

The story drew national attention, including from CNN, because of the involvement of an adult and the tragic result.

But nearly all "cyberbullying" involves kids tormenting other kids, often schoolmates, with results that are less tragic but more insidious.

One Tucson expert on bullying prevention thinks it's time for a state law to address this ugly byproduct of technology.

About half the states in the nation are considering or have passed laws to address harassing behaviors on the Internet, said Mike Tully, media specialist with the Tucson-based West Regional Equity Network, a federally funded center that works with schools to remove barriers to student achievement.

For as long as there have been schools, there have been schoolyard bullies. The age of the Internet

and the cell phone has taken it to a whole new level, with kids becoming vulnerable to attack through social Web pages such as MySpace and Facebook, chat rooms, instant messaging, text messaging and blogs.

"It's anonymous and it's ubiquitous," said Tully, a certified trainer in bullying prevention who has published articles on cyberbullying.

"On the school playground, you might fear the bully, but you know who he is. Everyone does . . . In cyberbullying, you don't know who's out there and you don't know when it's going to come," Tully said. "It's like a sneak attack."

The potential witnesses to the bullying are everybody on the Web, "which, of course, increases the degree of fear and embarrassment experienced by the victim," he said.

The bullying can't be dismissed by saying it's just kids being kids and the victims need to toughen up.

Bullying of all types hurts individual student performance by affecting school attendance and, thus, also hurts schools in their efforts to meet federal student achievement standards, Tully said. Also, studies have shown bullying has a negative effect not only on those directly involved - bully and bullied - but on anyone who witnesses it, he said.

"It's 100 percent victimization," he said.

The rub is how to address cyberbullying without infringing on people's free speech rights, especially since cyberbullying takes place mostly off of school campuses and outside school hours.

"The Supreme Court has never really told us what the jurisdictional boundaries are for school discipline, when to discipline a kid for something he did off campus," said Tully, a lawyer.

Schools that have tried to discipline students for cyberbullying have found themselves embroiled in lawsuits and in some cases were found to have violated the student's First Amendment rights, Tully said.

Tully said Arizona has a law to address bullying in schools. He'd like to see it expanded to require all districts to adopt anti-cyberbullying policies (only a handful of Arizona districts have done so to date) that include an important standard.

The courts have ruled that schools can discipline students for behavior outside of school if the

actions create a "substantial disruption" to the educational environment.

Tully said a good prevention policy should define what constitutes "a substantial disruption" and specify the types of cybermischief that are unacceptable.

Such a policy should require schools to create contracts for using school computers and accessing the Internet. And it should advise parents that even if a school finds no basis for a suspension or an expulsion, that parents are expected to act on their children's offensive Internet behavior.

Holly Colonna, lead counselor for Tucson Unified School District, which doesn't address cyberbullying in detail in its anti-bullying policy, said until laws and policies catch up with technology, it's important to educate kids on Internet hazards and behavior.

"We really need to be very proactive with it. Parents, parents, parents need to be vigilant. Kids need to understand what's appropriate and inappropriate language and action in any scenario," she said.

Tully said he wouldn't want to see lawmakers overreact - with laws that run afoul of the First Amendment - to the extraordinary story of Megan.

"Big stories make bad law," he said. "Much better that we focus on the day-to-day silence that is the real suffering, not the headline grabbers."

Tully knows some people think the solution to cyberbullying is as easy as telling your kid to turn off the computer.

As reasonable as that sounds to anyone over 35, Tully said it's not realistic.

"To a kid, that's like saying, 'give up your social life,' " he said.

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