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ILLINOIS SCHOOLS FACE UP TO FACEBOOK: MANDATING INTERNET SAFETY INSTRUCTION IN ILLINOIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by LAUREN RAFFERTY

A 14-year-old New Jersey girl was arrested on March 29, 2009, on child pornography charges for posting nude photos of herself on MySpace.¹ Police believe that she took more than 30 pictures of herself for her boyfriend, presenting an unusual case for prosecutors where the victim of pornography is the same person as the perpetrator.² This teenager's story highlights the dynamic nature of internet risks for students.

Children today are faced with a host of new dangers and risks as a result of internet connectivity and internet applications such as social networking and media sharing sites. These dangers include sexual predators who use the internet to communicate with their victims, undesirable exposure from the posting of private photos that end up public, “cyber-bullying,” and even becoming unwilling stars in online videos. Videos of fights between classmates recorded on a camera phone or digital camera are increasingly common on media sharing sites like YouTube. Recently one video depicted two teenage girls coaxed by their friends into punching and choking each other.³ Another video showed a fight set to music and included pre-fight interviews with the teenagers involved.⁴

ILLINOIS’ RESPONSE TO INTERNET DANGERS

In an effort to curb these dangers to children, the Illinois legislature passed a bill requiring public schools to incorporate some form of internet safety instruction into the school year beginning in the 2009-2010 school year.⁵ The legislation does not specifically outline a curriculum for schools, but rather grants school boards the discretion to determine the “scope and duration of this unit of instruction.”⁶ However, the statute does recommend topics for instruction, including “responsible use of social networking websites,” “recognizing online solicitations,” “risks of transmitting personal information,” “reporting online harassment and cyber-bullying,” and “reporting illegal activities and communications.”⁷ The legislation also requires that the Illinois State Board of Education provide materials that will aid schools in their instruction.⁸

Illinois is not the first state to take the step of requiring internet safety to be incorporated into the curriculum of public schools. Virginia was the first state to pass such legislation.⁹ The Virginia legislation was enacted in response to the threat of sexual predators and the problems posed by social-networking sites that students frequent.¹⁰ Virginia’s mandatory internet safety instruction began the 2007-2008 school year.¹¹ More states are sure to follow Illinois and Virginia as internet safety is a national issue.

INTERNET FEARS: A REALITY FOR ILLINOIS STUDENTS

Beverly Stewart, a seventh grade teacher at Lundahl Middle School in Crystal Lake, Illinois, has not seen any incidents of cyber-bullying but does think the internet poses increasing problems to her students, particularly because her students “use the internet both in and out of school and. . .don’t have a clue of its dangers.”¹² Stewart, who has been teaching for over 20 years, has certainly seen the changing nature of bullying that comes with an increased use of the internet.¹³ More and more students go online daily, both at home and school, and 58 percent of teenagers have an online profile.¹⁴ Furthermore, 32 percent of teenagers who use the internet have been contacted by a complete stranger online.¹⁵ The same percentage of teens have experienced at least some form of harassment online, such as receiving threatening messages, having private material forwarded without permission, having a rumor spread about them, or having a photo of themselves posted without permission.¹⁶

With cyber-bullying on the rise, insults and fights that a teacher may have been able to break up in his or her classroom are now being carried over to social networking websites. Recently a teenager filed suit against one such website, Facebook, demanding \$3 million in damages for bullying she claims she suffered at the hand of former high school classmates on the website.¹⁷ She alleges that classmates used Facebook to spread rumors that she had contracted AIDS and participated in bestiality.¹⁸ Extreme examples such as this one require that Illinois schools effectively implement this new legislation.

OUT OF THE CAPITOL AND INTO THE CLASSROOM: IMPLEMENTATION OF ILLINOIS LEGISLATION

However large the problems faced by teachers and parents of teenagers and young children, it remains unclear how schools in Illinois will implement this new requirement when it takes effect next year. The Illinois State Board of Education, required by statute to provide resources to school boards on its website, has provided example practices of internet safety instruction delivered by school districts that have already incorporated it into their curriculum.¹⁹ Schools that have implemented the requirement include Collinsville Community School District 92 and Community High School District 128, among others.²⁰ School District 92 has the most comprehensive curricular informa-

tion on its website, providing curricular ideas for all grade levels using a variety of media and gives tips for internet safety that include links to various internet safety tools, such as tutorials on changing MySpace and Facebook security and privacy settings.²¹

It is clear that with the diversity in dangers children and teenagers face online, mandatory internet safety instruction serves a vitally important purpose. Brooke Walper, a high school math teacher at Glenbrook North High School in Northbrook, Illinois, thinks that this instruction is imperative.²² Walper, who is in her second year of teaching, highlights many of the dangers she sees for her students by noting that “part of the problem is that they don’t know anything that they say/post online can be kept forever and used against them.”²³ She also states, “I think a lot of kids think they have friends and a social life online so they are willing to do things that they wouldn’t necessarily do in person,” suggesting that students such as the 14-year-old New Jersey teenager may post things online that they would not feel comfortable sharing in their normal everyday lives.²⁴ Stewart feels “the most important thing the teenagers should learn is there is no privacy on the internet. Once your name and information is ‘out there,’ who knows the millions of people who have access to this information?”²⁵

While Walper and Stewart believe that internet safety instruction is a valuable use of school time in middle school and high school, they also agree that parents must have a role to play in making the internet safer for their children.²⁶ Walper says that parents “should monitor what students do and how much they do online.”²⁷ Stewart, however, feels strongly that schools can and should play a major role in internet safety instruction. Stewart explained, “. . .it should be the responsibility of parents but if it is taught in the schools we know our ‘mission’ will be accomplished. We have no way of guaranteeing that parents will take it upon themselves to teach internet safety.”²⁸

Since many students use the internet away from school in ways that may affect their classmates in school, Illinois has given part of the responsibility for educating children about internet safety to school districts. It remains to be seen, however, how public schools in the state will actually implement these changes and if the changes will effectuate major changes in the way that children use the internet and technology.

NOTES

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- 4 *Id.*
- 5 105 ILCS 5/27-13.3 (2009)
- 6 *Id.*
- 7 *Id.*
- 8 *Id.*
- 9 Adam Hochberg, *Back to School: Reading, Writing, and Internet Safety*, NPR, Sept. 17, 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14427020>.
- 10 *Id.*
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- 13 *Id.*
- 14 Amanda Lenhart, *Teens, Online Stranger Contact & Cyberbullying What the Research is Telling Us*, PEW INTERNET & AMER. LIFE PROJECT, Presentation, *available at* <http://www.pewinternet.org/Presentations/2008/Teens-Online-Stranger-Contact—Cyberbullying.aspx>
- 15 *Id.*
- 16 *Id.*
- 17 Marc Parry, *Student Finds Facebook Less Than Friendly*, TIMES-UNION, March 5, 2009, <http://www.timesunion.com/AspStories/story.asp?category=MULTIMEDIA&storyID=776334&BCCode=&newsdate=3/5/2009>
- 18 *Id.*
- 19 Illinois State Board of Education, Curriculum & Instruction: Be Internet Safe, http://www.isbe.state.il.us/curriculum/html/internet_safety.htm (last visited Apr. 2, 2009).
- 20 *Id.*
- 21 Collinsville Unit 10 Internet Safety Resource Page, <http://www.kahoks.org/safeweb/> (last visited Mar. 30, 2009).
- 22 E-mail Interview with Brooke Walper, Teacher, Glenbrook North High School, Northbrook, Illinois (March 9, 2009).
- 23 *Id.*
- 24 *Id.*
- 25 Interview with Stewart, *supra* note 12.
- 26 *See* Interview with Walper, *supra* note 22; *See also* Interview with Stewart, *supra* note 12.
- 27 Interview with Walper, *supra* note 22.
- 28 Interview with Stewart, *supra* note 12.