Schools begin taking bullying by the horns
Awareness, training, outreach and districtwide rules are being established to say 'enough is enough'

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By Mary Niederberger, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

As assistant principal at Jefferson Middle School in Mt. Lebanon for four years, Robert Friel was in charge of discipline, and that meant dealing with the school's bullies.

He encountered typical bullies -- those who push and shove in the hallways and ridicule students in the lunchroom or gym. But just as often, Mr. Friel found himself dealing with bullies who aren't so obvious: cyberbullies.

Those bullies hide behind their computers, cell phones and other electronics, using them to issue taunts and threats and to spread nasty rumors far more quickly and anonymously than the bullies who act in person.

"The concept was the same as traditional bullying, but they felt they could unleash a little bit more. They would just make up horrible things about other kids," said Mr. Friel, who was recently appointed principal of Markham Elementary in Mt. Lebanon.

Mr. Friel is not the only local school administrator to realize keeping order is now a much bigger job than being watchful of hallways, cafeterias and gym classes.

In recent years, school officials have learned the Internet world is the new frontier for bullying, and the activity has become more prevalent with the abundance and sophistication of hand-held electronics. It comes in the form of text messages, e-mails and postings on online discussion boards or such social networking sites as Facebook and YouTube.

"Bullying is no longer just passing notes," said Gateway School District spokeswoman Cara Zanella. "It's a whole new learning curve for all of us."

And cyberbullying can be more intense for its victims because it doesn't end when the school day ends.
"It's more difficult to escape," said Peter Berg, director of guidance for the Mt. Lebanon School District. "Very often, the messages are coming in at 8 o'clock at night or on the weekend."

Cyberbullying has been in the headlines this month -- which is National Bullying Prevention Month -- because of the suicide of Rutgers University freshman Tyler Clementi, who jumped off the George Washington Bridge last month after his college roommate posted online a video of Mr. Clementi being intimate with another male. The roommate and another student are facing criminal charges.

It is the second suicide blamed on cyberbullying to make national headlines this year. In January, Phoebe Prince, 15, who had recently moved to South Hadley, Mass., hanged herself after a torrent of bullying from other students that included text messages, Facebook posts and personal confrontations. Six classmates face criminal charges in her death.

There have been no local headlines about children hurting themselves as a result of cyberbullying, but the worry is never far from the minds of school administrators.

"We really try to be proactive on this as much as we can," said William Short, principal of Gateway High School. Mr. Short said that education and intervention programs have reduced the incidence of bullying by 40 percent within the past three to four years at Gateway High School.

Terms such as "cyberethics" and "digital citizenship" are introduced as educators talk about the importance of teaching students how to maneuver responsibly through the electronic world in which they live.

The Cyberbullying Research Center, an online clearinghouse maintained by two professors, Sameer Hinduja of Florida Atlantic University and Justin Patchin of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, estimates that 20 percent of students experience cyberbullying.

That statistic came from a random sampling of 4,441 youths ages 10 to 18 taken in February. The sampling also found that adolescent girls are significantly more likely to have experienced cyberbullying than boys and that methods varied by gender with "girls more likely to spread rumors, while boys are more likely to post hurtful pictures or videos."

A number of districts in the area have instituted the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, developed by Dan Olweus, a psychology professor from Norway who is
considered the leading authority on bullying based on his 20 years of research on the topic.

The program, which has been updated over the years to include cyberbullying, calls for defining clearly for students what bullying is and how to react to it. It encourages students to break the code of silence that often keeps them from telling on one another even in serious situations.

The Highmark Foundation, as part of its Highmark Healthy High 5 program, has allocated $10 million since 2007 to fight bullying by funding the Bullying Prevention Institute and helping Pennsylvania school districts fund the Olweus program. So far 270 schools across the state have taken part, but by the end of the effort, more than 400 schools will have gotten funding.

Among local districts that have received funding for the Olweus program are: Allegheny Valley, Baldwin-Whitehall, Bethel Park, Clairton, Fox Chapel Area, Hampton Township, Mt. Lebanon, North Allegheny, Penn Hills, Plum Borough, Riverview, South Allegheny, Steel Valley, Sto-Rox, West Allegheny, West Mifflin Area and Woodland Hills.

Mr. Short said just about every case of bullying that his administration investigates at Gateway High School has online involvement.

"Typically, we face this most on Mondays and Tuesdays because of stuff from the weekend," Mr. Short said. "Over the weekend, the barriers go down, they get on the keyboards and on the cell phones and they type whatever is on their minds."

School officials say they see everything from nasty comments and rumors, rude or lewd photos or videos and even fake Facebook pages created about victims. Mr. Short said he was a victim when some students created a false Facebook page with his name.

School administrators often hear about the issue from a parent who calls to inform them when they find out their child is a victim. Experts say children are sometimes reluctant to report they are being cyberbullied because they fear their parents will take away their computer or cell phone.

But if a parent notices his child doesn't want to go to school, it can be a signal that bullying is going on.

"You can have kids [who] are afraid to come to school, afraid of the questions they are going to get asked or afraid of who is going to say what to them based on things
said on the Internet outside of school," said Leah Wells, Quaker Valley psychologist and the pupil services director's assistant. The district also uses the Olweus program.

Sometimes the actions result in criminal charges when students cross the line to harassment, said Jim Modrak, resource officer for the Bethel Park School District. He said his district filed criminal charges in a cyberbullying case that took place in recent years at Neil Armstrong Middle School, which serves grades five and six.

"There was ongoing harassment making the student out in a negative fashion and a mass posting. The kid did it with the intent to harass and embarrass the other kid," Mr. Modrak said.

In another instance, Mr. Modrak said he was presented with information about a Facebook page that showed photos from an underage drinking party. Police and school officials were able to identify some of the students involved, and they were charged with underage drinking.

That incident taught students that postings they make can be harmful to themselves -- a lesson districts are trying teach as part of anti-bullying programs.

"We have to tell them you can't put stuff out there. There is no privacy, no shield," Mr. Modrak said.

Christopher Stengel, director of technology for the Mt. Lebanon School District, said students must realize there is a "footprint" of everything they post on the Internet and that everyone from college admissions officers to employers are searching candidates' online histories.

That message has sunk in with Jarrod Cingel, a Bethel Park High School freshman, who chose cyberbullying as a computer science topic in two science competitions last spring. He developed a program to screen offensive words from instant messages.

"My school has talked to us often about the Internet and Facebook and how college counselors look at Facebook pages. My parents talked to me about it before I made a Facebook account. If that many people are cautioning you against it, you should heed it," he said.

The Gateway school board is debating a new bullying/cyberbullying policy that mirrors those approved by other districts, including North Allegheny and Mt. Lebanon, and the language proposed by the state, which approved a mandate in 2008 that all districts adopt bullying/cyberbullying policies.
That language permits the districts to take action against students for online activities conducted off school property, and on private equipment if there is a connection between the activities and a disruption of the school day.

Gateway school Director Dan Nowak has spoken out against the part of the policy that calls for disciplining students for activity outside of school and questions whether the district has the authority to do so.

In recent years, there have been some challenges around the country to such discipline based on students' First Amendment rights to free speech.

But Mt. Lebanon and North Allegheny officials said they'd investigated online activities that have taken place outside of school when the activities caused problems in school; no parent has challenged their authority.

"If it carries into the school, then that school has the right to implement discipline," said Arlene Wheat, assistant superintendent of special education and pupil services in the North Allegheny School District.

School officials say educating parents about cyberbullying is as important as educating the students, and a number of programs are set for this month. Included are presentations by educators from the state attorney general's office.

Nils Frederiksen, spokesman for the attorney general, said the program is by far the most requested of those offered by his office. Since the cyberbullying program was created in September 2009, it has been presented at 422 schools, with another 115 scheduled for the rest of 2010.

North Allegheny will sponsor one of the speakers Tuesday. This presentation follows one recently given to students at North Allegheny Intermediate High School by John Halligan, a Vermont man who travels the country speaking about the suicide of his 13-year-old son, Ryan, as a result of cyberbullying.

"The message is if you are doing this to someone, stop it now," Dr. Wheat said. "If it is happening to you, tell someone. If it's happening to a friend, then you know someone needs to intervene."

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