Choate students kicked out of school for cyberbullying

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WALLINGFORD - There’s hundreds of them, each one more lurid, profane and hateful than the last.

A clique of teenage girls at Choate Rosemary Hall school in Wallingford exchanged Facebook posts about their sexual activities and vicious attacks against other girls they did not like.

“EWWW, SHE’S SO GROSS AND FAKED AND SPRAY TANNED,” one Choate girl writes, using all capital letters that serve as the online equivalent of shouting. “Some ho kissing Herbie.”

“You know it is possible to say no when someone tries to have sex with you,” a commentary about another girl begins. “Just throwing that out there. Like no is still an option, you whore.”

The writers thought their Facebook posts would remain private exchanges between themselves, but in the online world, nothing stays private for long. The posts eventually made their way around campus and to the Register. The Register is publishing a few of the posts, but not the entire thread due to privacy concerns.

The fallout since the controversy was revealed earlier this month has now taken a more serious turn. Sources said two of the six girls have been expelled. Four have been suspended until the end of the fall term.

The school earlier this month blocked students access to Facebook through the school’s computer network, a ban that remains in place.

Lorraine Connelly, a school spokesman, said “disciplinary outcomes” have been taken related to the incident, though she declined to be more specific.

The controversy has also put the prestigious private school squarely in the middle of a national debate about online bullying.

Mary Verselli, another school spokesman, has said the action was taken because a half-dozen senior girls “had created an online diary in which they said some things that weren’t especially nice.”

Others at the school have referred to the postings as “a burn book,” which contains the names and photographs of people the girls didn’t like. It refers to a term taken from the 2004 movie “Mean Girls.”
Regardless of how it's described or what it's called, what happened at Choate has once again raised debate about how social networking sites like Facebook are being used in cyberbullying incidents.

Cyberbullying was already a hot button issue because of a Rutgers University student’s suicide after videos of him having sex with another male student were posted online without his knowledge.

While Choate chose to deal with its problem with a Facebook ban, experts in the fields of social media and bullying said a different approach is needed.

Students don’t get a lot of training in how to use today’s media, today’s technology,” said David Gudelunas, an associate professor of communications at Fairfield University.

“Banning Facebook is like trying to use a fork to plug a hole in a dam. It seems to me that there should be more interest in teaching young people its proper use and it should start as early as middle school,” Gudelunas said.

He said schools and parents must confront the issue because kids will be exposed to social media. They are adept at it, he said, “because they’re digital natives.”

“It’s all they’ve ever know,” Gudelunas said.

Certain aspects of the online culture lend themselves to today’s equivalent of mob behavior, said Sameer Hinduja, an associate professor in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Florida Atlantic University and co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center, which is devoted to helping combat the problem.

Hinduja said that one in five young people are victims of cyberbullying through social media and the text messaging phenomenon. A Pew Research study released this month showed that one in three teenagers send or receive 100 text messages a day.

“We tend to see kids being more cruel with text and words because they don’t have to deal with the consequences,” he said. "Neurologically, they are not fully developed and so they don’t think about the long term. And so they lose themselves in the nameless, faceless crowd on the Internet.”

But Gudelunas argues that while the Internet may provide young people with an anonymity that lends itself to bullying, it’s naïve to suggest that they don’t know what they’re doing.

“I think they know exactly what they’re doing,” he said. “They’re willing to sacrifice privacy for access … that allows them to be an effective bully.”


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