



The last word Cyberbullying

CYBERBULLYING IS NO JOKE, AS STEVE HOLDEN EXPLAINS.

'A series of raunchy photos' was 'broadcast' on Facebook by two teachers from Warwick State High School in Queensland, according to a report in the *Warwick Daily News* in March. Although access to the site had been restricted to 'friends,' according to ABC's *Media Watch*, those 'friends' included *Daily News* journalists. A departmental investigation found that neither teacher had breached departmental guidelines relating to the private use of social networking sites, but both teachers were reminded of the ongoing need to ensure all conduct in relation to the use of social networking sites was beyond reproach. Neither teacher was suspended.

In Western Australia, 11 students from Leeming Senior High School in Perth's south were suspended after posting comments on a Facebook page that targeted a female maths teacher at the school. Around 600 people signed up to the page. The school's principal told Perth radio station 6PR the page was shut down as soon as the identity of its creator was discovered and letters were sent to the parents of students whose names appeared on it.

Two Year 9 students from Sydney's Ascham School in May last year were suspended after naming 31 students in a four-page posting on MySpace that referred to alleged sexual activity, drug taking and alcohol use. The two students were subsequently withdrawn by their parents from the school. It seems that we face a cyberbullying epidemic, but what does the research say?

Research on cyberbullying by Megan Price and John Dagleish found that cyberbullying most commonly occurs in the transitional years between primary and secondary school. A study involving nearly 700 students in Years 7 to 10 by Catherine McLoughlin suggests teachers underestimate the incidence of cyberbullying because students under-report it. 'Students don't report it because it means whatever rights they have now, it is likely they will be taken away,' McLoughlin says.

According to a study by Damian Maher, cyberbullying occurs both at school and at home; face-to-face school bullies are also likely to be cyberbullies; and most cyberbullies are boys, who cyberbully more and more aggressively than do girls.

Research in the United States by Justin Patchin and Sameer Hinduja suggests that most targets of cyberbullying know who is bullying them, most young people who are cyberbullied have an existing relationship with the person or people cyberbullying them and the most common place in which that existing relationship germinates into bullying is school.

One of the problems here in Australia goes back to a phrase you just read – 'Research in the US.' Many of the stories about cyberbullying, and the way schools handle it, have been borrowed from the land of free speech and the home of the brave, and that's had the effect of making intervention by schools to address cyber-

bullying look like an invitation to litigate. Sure, judges have come down in favour of schools, but just as often they've come down against them – on the basis of the protection of free speech. The US problem goes back to *Tinker v Des Moines Independent Community School District*, a US Supreme Court case that defined the constitutional rights of students in US state schools. Essentially, the Supreme Court in *Tinker* ruled that US educators have no right to prohibit a student's right to free speech, unless it would 'materially and substantially interfere with the requirements of appropriate discipline in the operation of the school.'

The leaders of Leeming SHS and Ascham School might argue that the cyberbullying incidents they faced materially and substantially interfered with the requirements of appropriate discipline in the operation of their schools, but the point is that, in Australia, they didn't have to argue the case.

Despite all the doom and gloom about cyberbullying, research by Patchin and Hinduja suggests that your students are getting better at handling the social networking sites where it occurs. In 2006, they analysed 2,423 randomly sampled adolescent MySpace profiles, and found the vast majority were making responsible choices about sharing information online. In a follow-up study published this year, Patchin and Hinduja revisited those 2,423 adolescent MySpace profiles, and found that adolescents are exercising increasing discretion on MySpace, limiting access to their profile and even abandoning MySpace altogether.

Mind you, that could just mean they've moved to Facebook. **T**

This month's Last Word was written by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher, and last year's highly commended winner in the Best Columnist category of the Melbourne Press Club Quill Awards for the Last Word.

For references, visit <http://teacher.acer.edu.au>