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Cyberbullying knows no boundaries.

Lisa Grzybowski

Online cruelty may happen off school property via home computers and cell phones, but that hasn't prevented it from infiltrating schools and disrupting the educational environment.

In fact, a January study by the MindOH! Foundation, a Houston-based company that helps kids who are having problems in school, found nearly 80 percent of the 5,500 children it surveyed had either read or spread gossip online.

Also, more than half surveyed said they had seen their peers made fun of on Web sites.

The potential for harm is why the Washington Township school district has a policy in effect against cyberbullying, defined as the sending or posting of harmful text or images using the Internet or other communications devices.

In a March letter to students' parents and guardians, the school district warned that disciplinary action would be taken when cyberbullying and other forms of victimization disrupt school life.

The decision to attack cyberbullying head-on was made in response to parent, teacher and administrator concerns, said Superintendent Thomas Flemming.

Such intimidation hasn't become a huge problem for the district's 10 schools, but officials want to confront it before it does, he said.

"Teachers and administrators have to spend time defusing the

issue instead of teaching students," Flemming said.

An informal survey of tri-county schools reveals that, unlike Washington Township, most have not addressed cyberbullying as a specific issue.

State law requires school districts to have a policy to address bullying, harassment and intimidation. Also, many districts have policies specifying what is acceptable use of school computers. However, most haven't directly addressed cyberbullying or the protocol to deal with it when it happens off school property but affects in-school learning.

Several school districts said that because present policies prohibit all types of bullying, it would be redundant to create a new rule or expand an old one to deal with cyberbullying.

"I think that our policies would be valid for whatever type of bullying occurs," said Geraldine Carroll, superintendent of the Lindenwold school district.

Said Joseph DelRossi, superintendent of Medford schools: "Any form of bullying, whether it be through the computer, whether it's verbal or through the phone or camera phone, it won't be tolerated. It's not as if it's not covered at this time."

Furthermore, several school superintendents said they didn't think cyberbullying was a major problem in their districts.

"It has never been brought up by parents, teachers or students at school board meetings or otherwise," said Winslow Superintendent Lawrence A. Hobdell, who noted he hadn't given the topic much thought until a reporter contacted him.

"We have not had that as a major issue," said Pat Milich, spokeswoman for Lenape Regional High School District in Burlington County. "From the time students are freshmen, bullying is one issue that is so strongly stressed that there is zero tolerance."

Lenape Regional, however, intends to send assistant principals from each of its five high schools to a May 17 cyberbullying workshop being hosted by the New Jersey Office of the Attorney General, Milich said.

"We are aware that it could become a problem," she said.

In Washington Township, teachers Nick Bozza and Steven Whalen are pleased with how their district is handling the cyberbullying issue.

"Cyberbullying has taken on a whole new twist in the last four or five years, especially with instant messaging," said Bozza, a fifth-grade teacher.

"It's a concern that's not going to go away," said Whalen, a high school technology teacher. "It has definitely influenced the school and how the students conduct their day."

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