



TAUNTON DAILY GAZETTE

Bridgewater State University professor gets tough with cyber-bullies

By Mike Melanson
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BRIDGEWATER — In the old days, protection from school bullies could be found by being around adults. Not so with cyber-bullying, which takes place on home computers and on personal mobile phones.

Kids standing next to a teacher or parent can be cyber-bullied, and the adults may not realize it. Kids who are abused, harassed and threatened may not be able to get away from cyber-bullies, even on weekends and during school vacations.

And they may be afraid to report it, fearing parents may take away the mobile phone or computer.

"It's 24-7," said Renee Donohue, a guidance counselor at Silver Lake Regional High School in Kingston.

"It gives people a pervasive sense of vulnerability," she said.

Donohue was among more than 100 educators from across Massachusetts who assembled Tuesday at Bridgewater State University, where Elizabeth K. Englander, director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at BSU, unveiled a cyber-skills and cyber-bullying curriculum for grades 9-12.

During the three-hour, morning workshop at the John Joseph Moakley Center, Englander walked teachers, principals, guidance counselors and program directors through 30 cyber-skills lessons for high school students.

Topics include sexting and social pressure, handling digital communications when angry, and the nature of friendships and online "friends."

Englander, who is also a psychology professor at BSU and lead author of the curriculum, said she hopes it helps teachers to get students to understand how electronic communications affect daily living and relationships.

By increasing cyber-skills, digital abuse and cyber-bullying may be reduced in and out of the classroom, she said.

"The best way to address it is the old-fashioned way, to talk about it," she said.

In the lessons, students are prompted to write about or answer questions about a particular cyber-skills issue, such as cyber-bullying and free speech, the legality of shooting video, and being smart on Facebook.

The lessons also include guides to help teachers lead classroom discussions about each lesson.

Steve Folino, program coordinator at the North River Collaborative in Rockland, said students should be concerned with privacy and invasions of privacy – online and in social networks.

He said the MARC curriculum will help adults and teenagers alike become more aware of good cyber-skills.

In one lesson, sophomores are asked if students looking into getting into college or a job should be careful about what they post online or how such information could be used against them. The teacher then reminds students that they are tracked online, and to consider who might be interested in using that information.

Another lesson outlines how some mobile phone applications share personal data, such as a phone's unique ID number and other personal information, with other companies without disclosure or consent.

"In the cyber-world, there is no privacy," Folino said.

The curriculum can be requested, free of charge, by any Massachusetts school. For more information, visit www.MARCcenter.org.

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