In the world of cyberspace, students may believe that there are no laws. That’s why schools need to provide limits that keep students safe.

Every classroom in America must be connected to the information superhighway with computers and good software and well trained teachers,” urged President Clinton during his January 1996 State of the Union address. Six years later, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 99 percent of U.S. public schools had computers connected to the Internet (2002). Add to this picture the omnipresence of Internet access at home and the near-ubiquity of mobile phones, many with text-messaging options, and we can conclude that our students are careening down the information superhighway at full speed.

This technological explosion and ease of access to powerful new communication tools would have occurred without Clinton's urging. No one had to drag our schools and students kicking and screaming into the 21st century. But technology—specifically, the misuse of technology—has caught many of us off guard. It's hard enough to keep track of students while they're in the school building. Now school administrators and teachers are being asked to oversee students in cyberspace, which anyone can access just about anywhere, anytime, day or night.

Technology has spawned a host of thorny problems, none more pernicious than the cyberbully—defined as anyone who repeatedly misuses technology to harass, intimidate, bully, or terrorize another person. Such behavior usually takes the form of inappropriate and hurtful rumors or threats sent through e-mails, instant messages, text messages, or Web site posts, with the sender often anon-ymous or disguised as someone else.

With the arrival of the new line of camera phones that can instantly access the Web, we are now starting to see even nastier stuff. Any youngster can now sneak into a bathroom or locker room, snap a few photos, and upload those photos directly from his or her phone to a Web site that caters to multimedia messages. There, anyone in the world with a computer and an Internet connection can view, download, and archive the images. All this mischief can be accomplished in seconds—a scary thought for both the victim and the perpetrator. The surprise is not that cybermisconduct occurs, but that it does not occur more often.

A Risky New World

Technology is erasing walls and borders and bringing people together, but the downside is that it has all but erased the reflection time that once existed between planning a silly prank (or a
serious act) and actually committing the deed. Simultaneously, the power and speed of technology has made it nearly impossible to contain a regrettable action or keep it confidential. In contrast, back when many of us were in school, it was relatively easy to find and destroy all written evidence of dubious behavior and crass language because the evidence existed on sheets of paper, bulletin boards, or walls.

In my role as dean of students at an independent high school, I have found myself dealing with a number of incidents of cyberbullying. Occasionally, a concerned student or an angry parent appears at my office door to tell me about hurtful e-mails, instant messages, or blogs that were sent or posted—sometimes by a known student, sometimes by an anonymous person—when school wasn't even in session. The offensive electronic communication is often just the tip of the iceberg. The victim has typically received many offensive messages or images before becoming desperate enough to complain to adults. And the cyberbullies often have more than one victim and will continue their offensive behavior until they get caught.

School administrators, business leaders in technology-based companies, and parents need to educate themselves and take responsibility for getting this growing problem under control. We need to be vigilant sheriffs in this new Wild West—a cyberworld buzzing with kids just a few keystrokes away from harming other people, often for no other reason than that the sheriffs are sleeping. As anyone who has ever been the victim of bullying and harassment will tell you, the bullets may not be real, but they can hurt.

Techno-Byte

Unwanted sexual or “nasty” comments were encountered online by one-third of British 9–19-year-olds who reported going online daily or weekly. Only 7 percent of parents were aware that their child had received sexual comments, and only 4 percent that their child had been bullied online.

—London School of Economics, 2005

What Educators Can Do

As an educator, you should start by addressing the issue of cyberbullying head-on. Make sure that your school incorporates into its computer instruction clear rules governing the use of technology and warnings for potential offenders.

One important step is to make all students aware that no computer or mobile phone—and therefore no person—is really anonymous in cyberspace. Your school’s technology teachers should demonstrate to students how each time they access the Internet they generate an electronic fingerprint called an IP, or Internet Protocol address (a string of four numbers punctuated by three periods), which authorities can use to trace all electronic communication from computers or mobile phones.

People tend to have the impression that everything that happens in cyberspace is temporary and fleeting, but the truth is that communication in cyberspace often leaves a trail. Cyberspace reaches far and wide and deep into the hard drives of individual computers in classrooms and private homes. More important, behaviors in cyberspace (yes, words are deeds) are
downloadable, printable, and sometimes punishable by law. Students need to hear this message, starting in upper elementary school.

You might want to consider enlisting your local police department to help you get the message to students. Many city and suburban police departments are creating cybercrime units and adding detectives who are well versed in cybercriminal behaviors. A few years ago, in the wake of a nasty 9th grade cyberbullying incident at our school, we invited a detective to an upper school assembly. He demonstrated how all communication in cyberspace can be traced to individual electronic devices and reaffirmed the school's message that treating all members of the community with respect does not begin and end at the school’s front door. After this assembly, we modified the computer instruction required for our 9th graders to include conversations about cyberbullying. Since the assembly and follow-up instruction, we have not had another reported serious case of online misconduct.

Your police department may also provide essential help in tracking down the perpetrators of inappropriate cybermaterials. Unfortunately, such companies as Microsoft, Yahoo!, AOL, and Google presently allow people to use some of their powerful communication tools without requiring any verifiable information about the user. Representatives from these companies, claiming privacy issues, will not give school administrators information about user accounts and IP addresses. These companies will only talk to law enforcement officers—a policy that makes it difficult or impossible for school officials to act when they have evidence of cyberbullying.

You should also make the rules pertaining to appropriate technology use clear by printing them in student handbooks and in the literature the school sends home to parents, as well as posting them on the school Web site and in every classroom with an Internet-connected computer. A section on cyberbullying should include information about whom to contact if a student feels victimized (see “Sample School Policy Statement on Cyberbullying”). Quickly follow up on all alleged incidents to prevent them from snowballing, and have firm sanctions in place. Kids need to feel safe everywhere, including in cyberspace.

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**Sample School Policy Statement on Cyberbullying**

Neither the school’s network nor the broader Internet (whether accessed on campus or off campus, either during or after school hours) may be used for the purpose of harassment. All forms of harassment in cyberspace, often called cyberbullying, are unacceptable.

Cyberbullying includes, but is not limited to, the following misuses of technology: harassing, teasing, intimidating, threatening, or terrorizing another person by sending or posting inappropriate and hurtful e-mail messages, instant messages, text messages, digital pictures or images, or Web site postings (including blogs). Often the author (sender or poster) of the inappropriate material is disguised (logged on) as someone else.

Community members who feel that they have been the victims of such misuses of technology should not erase the offending material from the system. They should print a copy of the material and immediately report the incident to a school official (the director of technology, the dean of students, or the director of the upper school). All reports of harassment in cyberspace will be investigated fully.
Sanctions may include, but are not limited to, the loss of computer privileges, detention, suspension, separation, or expulsion from school.

*Source: Adapted from William Penn Charter School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.*

Look for creative ways to get the word out. In our school's computer lab, for example, the director of technology displays a mirror with the heading, "Are you a cyberbully, a victim, or a bystander?" At the bottom of the mirror is the definition of cyberbullying and contact information for lodging complaints.

It's also important to encourage and highlight professional development opportunities that focus on digital literacy. The payoffs are manifold. Teachers need to be digitally literate to help students develop skills and knowledge that they will need to succeed in the 21st century workplace, where technology dominates. Teachers also need to be digitally literate so that they have the confidence to mentor and discipline kids who abuse acceptable use conventions. Responsible teachers and administrators do not tolerate racist, sexist, homophobic, or threatening language in classrooms, hallways, or the lunch line. We should apply the same standards to communication in cyberspace.

You may find that when you first talk to students about cyberbullying, the students giggle or laugh. This is generally not the word that they use (they often favor the term *stalking* instead). But don't mistake their levity or word choice for a lack of concern about the problem: It's a good bet that by middle school, almost all students have been a victim of or a bystander to harassment in cyberspace. Educators need to start a dialogue.

In our required 9th grade computer classes, teachers highlight the school's policy on harassment in cyberspace, but they spend most of their time modeling empathy and making connections. For example, our director of technology often starts off his 9th grade computer classes by reminding students how times have changed and sharing ideas about what those changes mean:

> When I was your age, it was nearly impossible to commit a federal crime from home. Even if I had wanted to break the law, it would have required a lot of energy and planning. But today, you can commit a crime from the privacy of your home by making a few ill-chosen keystrokes. So now it's a matter of both carelessness and lawlessness. What is it that Spider-Man says?—"With great power comes great responsibility." Well, on the Web *everyone* has a lot of power, but we have to remember our responsibility to the community of our friends and peers here at school. Be careful. I bet most of you have known what it feels like to be the victim of bullying or harassment at some point in your life. Take care of one another online.

Certainly, educators who feel comfortable talking about issues like respect and equality have an easier time talking about these issues in relation to cyberspace. All institutions of learning ought to actively engage in expanding students' capacities for respect and dignity—stretching the moral imagination. It's time we extended this notion to include behaviors in cyberspace.

## What Parents Can Do

Parents have the most power and leverage to guide their children's activities in cyberspace. Yet many parents who have no problem setting down rules when giving their child a BB gun or a minibike go silent when unveiling the new computer or mobile phone. Parents need to become more involved with the ways in which their children are using technology. For starters, they should keep Internet-accessible computers in the family room during the teenage years. In
addition, they need to sit down with their children and talk about the do's and don'ts of each new piece of technology brought into the house. Conversations should not begin and end with confrontations over the monthly mobile phone bill.

Curiously, many parents feel uncomfortable laying down the law with electronic devices, as if doing so means that they are somehow breaking a bond of trust with their child. But parental apathy in this regard only increases the dissociation young people often feel between their “real” life and their online life. Parents and schools need to emphasize that “real” and online life are one and the same. Parents who do a good job educating their children about the rules and etiquette for electronic communication send the powerful message that children's online behavior matters as much as their behavior in other communication contexts.

The key is to start early. When parents make decisions with their 5-year-old, they should project 10 years down the road. Will this decision (putting a computer loaded with math games in the child's bedroom, for example) make it harder for them to intervene when that child is 15 (and the now-networked computer should be in a public space in the home)? Put simply, parents should not tolerate in cyberspace behaviors that they would not tolerate from their children—or from other people's children—in their own homes. Although parents may not have the right to read all electronic communications, children should know that they can lose their online privileges at the first sign of misuse. Big Brother may not be watching, but parents and school leaders should be pretty darn close.

**High Noon**

We have entered a new era in which digital literacy will become—if it hasn't already—the currency of a literate society. Along with positive opportunities, the digital age also creates opportunities for immature and impulsive individuals to do great harm—both to innocent victims and to themselves. Even as we open up the world of technology to our students, we need to protect them from the dangers that roam through this new Wild West. It's high noon for cyberbullies. It's time for the adults to lay down the law.

**References**


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Mark Franek is Dean of Students and an English teacher at the William Penn Charter School, 3000 West Schoolhouse Ln., Philadelphia, PA 19144; mfranek@penncharter.com.