

CYBERBULLYING:



A Student Perspective

Illinois Attorney General
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*“It’s just something that you see
in high school. That’s life.”*

—A student’s words about cyberbullying

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I. Introduction

Youth are fully engaged with technology and have incorporated it into their daily lives. As the world becomes more reliant on electronic communications, the technological knowledge and expertise of our children can support them in their future personal and professional success. However, with these innovations also come risks. Recent studies and current events continue to provide evidence of the growing rates of cyberbullying among youth. What used to be limited to face-to-face confrontations has now expanded to email, cell phone calls, text messages, digital pictures, and social networking sites as the medium for bullying and harassment. Not only do these methods allow for less visible and sometimes anonymous attacks, but they also allow a bully to spread information and images to a wide audience almost instantaneously.

Over the past year, the Office of Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan has increased its work on cyberbullying and harassment among youth. Our efforts have included coordinating with experts in the field, local schools and law enforcement as well as a surveying of over 4,200 youth across Illinois. These efforts culminated in a Cyber Safety Summit in November 2009 called by the Attorney General that brought together researchers, educators, law enforcement, and members of the technology communication industries to discuss these issues and potential solutions.

In an effort to build upon this cyber safety work, the Office of the Attorney General conducted a series of focus groups with students across the state to better understand what behaviors youth are engaging in online and by cell phone, how they view the problem, and what solutions they think will be most effective. It is critical to understand the motivations and intent of youth who are engaging in these behaviors and approach prevention from a development and social and emotional standpoint, rather than just a technological one, in order to obtain effective results and create a safer cyber environment for youth.

II. Overview of the Office of Attorney General Madigan's Cyberbullying Activities

The qualitative focus groups provided an opportunity to build on our previous work related to cyberbullying. Through the focus groups, we explored not only youth involvement in cyber activities, but also their perceptions. These findings will be examined along with those from the other efforts described below to better inform policymakers, educators, and parents on how we can work together to address this growing problem

Internet Safety Presentations. The High Tech Crimes Bureau of the Attorney General's Office provides Internet safety training to students, parents, teachers, and community groups throughout the state. In addition to protecting oneself from online predators, the training programs discuss the importance of digital citizenship for youth and strategies for dealing with cyberbullying. In 2009, the High Tech Crimes Bureau provided approximately 300 Internet safety training and education programs to over 39,000 parents, students, educators and community members across the state.

Youth Internet Safety Survey. In 2009, Attorney General Madigan, recognizing the issue of cyberbullying among youth, conducted a Cyber Safety Survey¹ of 4,200 youth in grades 3 through 12 across the state. According to the survey results, more than two-thirds of students have a cell phone with a camera and texting option and 33% have internet access on their phones. Over 18% of youth overall had been threatened online or by text, and for students 14 years of age and older, 28% reported having been threatened. More than 9% of all students reported having sent an inappropriate picture of someone via cell phone or computer, while 25% reported having received one. Again those rates are higher for students ages 14 and older, with 17% having sent an inappropriate picture and 41% having received one. For that same group, 30% had felt uncomfortable with a conversation they had with someone online or by text and 43% reported having said or written something inappropriate in those circumstances.

Cyber Safety Summit. On November 18, 2009, Attorney General Madigan held the state's first Cyber Safety Summit to bring together state and local law enforcement officials, school officials, and technology industry experts to discuss the dangers that come with children and teens' easy access to online and mobile technologies. After hearing from a panel of experts to frame the issues at hand, more than 90 attendees participated in break-out groups, facilitated by professionals from the Illinois Safe School Alliance, to discuss the issues and to recommend solutions. Break-out group discussions were engaging and driven by the experiences of law enforcement, school officials, and technology industry representatives. The Summit resulted in dozens of recommendations intended to be a starting point for developing projects, partnerships and policies to help protect children from online aggression. In a continual effort to enhance awareness, the Office of the Attorney General also premiered a website, www.ebully411.com, to provide resources about cyberbullying for youth, parents and educators.



Internet Safety Contest. In November 2009, the Office of the Attorney General and the Illinois State Board of Education established the first statewide Internet safety contest to raise awareness about the dangers of the Internet and prevent the misuse of technology. The contest, open to students in 1st through 12th grades, encouraged students to create either a poster or electronic message addressing Internet safety and, specifically in 2010, cyberbullying. Winning entries will be shared on participating school and state Web sites and winners will be honored at a State Board of Education meeting later this year.



¹ Cyber Safety Survey: The Results:
http://www.illinoisattorneygeneral.gov/pressroom/2009_11/Cybersafety_Survey_results.pdf

III. Summary of Focus Group Data Collection

Purpose. We intended the focus groups to be an exploratory research study that built on earlier concepts while trying to identify additional factors influencing youth cyber-behaviors from their own perspectives. We conducted the focus groups using a semi-structured interview model in which moderators followed a protocol that included specific topic areas to be discussed and prompting questions to be used to guide the discussion. As a qualitative research effort, this model allows for comparison across groups while exploring each issue in more depth through open-ended questions that leave room for participant-guided conversations. These findings are not intended to be representative of the experiences of all Illinois youth but rather to highlight the youth perspective about cyberbullying incidents and solutions that may not have been previously identified. The topics discussed in the protocol are based on previous research findings and ideas generated at the Cyber Safety Summit.

Methodology. We collected data between February and April 2010. Focus groups were based at six Illinois middle and high schools, with one group conducted at each school. While not representative, the sample was built based on a number of qualifying criteria to reflect aspects of schools statewide. These criteria include a balance of middle and high schools as well as urban, suburban and rural locations. The table below describes the matrix used to ensure coverage of sampling criteria.

	Middle Schools	High Schools
Rural	1	1
Suburban	1	1
Urban	1	1

We selected student participants with the assistance of school administrators using purposeful sampling and obtained parental consent prior to the focus group. With one exception, focus groups contained between eight and ten students for a total of 63 participants. The selection of students within schools was done in coordination with a contact from each school administration with a goal of recruiting relatively diverse groups of participants both in terms of individual demographics as well as engagement in school activities and academic achievement. It was important to gather feedback from a combination of student groups in order to gain greater insight into the type and frequency of cyber activities across many types of student groups. This is a critical step in the development of effective solutions.

Focus Group Topics. The focus groups followed a detailed protocol that included specific topic areas to be discussed and prompting questions to be used by moderators to guide the discussion. We developed these topics based on previous work of the Office of the Attorney General as well the work of researchers in the broader field. The use of a protocol to guide focus groups allowed for better comparison of findings across groups. The discussion topics are listed in the outline below.

- A. Youth aggressive cyber-activity/behaviors
 - 1) What types of aggressive cyber-activities have youth witnessed or heard about?
 - 2) What is the frequency of these behaviors?
- B. Youth perspective on the problem
 - 1) What do youth view as potentially dangerous about these cyber-activities?
 - 2) What activities do they think are not problematic?
 - 3) What motivates youth to participate in these activities?
 - 4) What are the real and perceived consequences?
- C. Solutions
 - 1) What do youth think of existing solutions to addressing these issues?
 - 2) What do you think about the solutions generated from the Cyber Safety Summit?
 - 3) What are alternative solutions to addressing these types of cyber-activities?

IV. Major Focus Groups Themes

The study design and subsequent analyses are intended to contribute new concepts and information to the emerging field of research about cyberbullying. Rather than represent the experiences of all Illinois youth, this research provides an opportunity to identify knowledge gaps and better understand cyberbullying behaviors from the youth perspective in the hope of moving towards effective solutions to this growing phenomenon. While each focus group resulted in distinct findings that reflected the unique experiences of the students, there were a number of common themes that were present across groups.

- **Impact:** Although many cyberbullying activities take place off school grounds or out of school hours, cyberbullying does impact school life. Repercussions may not always translate into traditional bullying behaviors, but it is often accompanied by discomfort, dirty looks, self-consciousness, and other forms of intimidation that impact daily life for the students. Participants felt that the adults may not recognize these other implications.
- **Motivations:** Youth motivations for cyberbullying mirror the motivations we see for many other types of adolescent behaviors (e.g., youth not thinking about the consequences before taking actions, high risk-taking behaviors that continue until they are caught.) However, there are also motivations unique to the cyber medium, such as youth willing to say things online that they would not say in person.
- **Solutions:** Participants said that they want to find solutions to cyberbullying but they do not know what those should be. Most felt that multifaceted solutions are the necessary approach, however, many students thought that suspension or direct punitive consequences are not sustainable solutions to cyberbullying. Rather, youth preferred mediation and felt that they have the ability to work through these issues if given a safe environment. Participants suggested that this process could be facilitated by a teacher or other school staff member who has a strong relationship with the students or could involve peer-to-peer mediation. All the focus groups supported peer-to-peer education efforts. Youth thought that younger youth would be more receptive to learning about cyberbullying risks, consequences, and solutions from older peers than from parents or educators.

V. Analysis & Trends

“It’s just something that you see in high school. That’s life.”

-A student’s words about cyberbullying

In five of the six focus groups, youth provided a recent example of cyberbullying that had occurred in their school or among their friends. In general, the middle school students had not had as much exposure to cyberbullying as high school students. In all three high school focus groups, participants noted that bullying either started online and then transitioned into in-person conflict or vice versa, but there was always overlap. While the participants from the sixth school, a rural middle school, had no recent examples of cyberbullying within their school, some of the students were familiar with cyberbullying due to the experiences of their older siblings or relatives.

Within these groups, the size of the school community seemed to influence how cyberbullying occurred and its impact. In a rural high school where all the students know each other and many have gone to school together for years, gossip and information related to bullying spread very quickly to the entire school. One student noted that she could send text messages to most of her classmates at the same time because she had all their numbers stored in her cell phone. In contrast, in a suburban high school with significantly more students, cyberbullying often occurs between students where the victim may not know offender at all. These youth described the transition from dirty looks and passive-aggressive interactions in the hallway to online bullying. One participant told how she had been harassed online and via text message by a group of girls she does not know personally because they were upset about a boy who liked her.

The community environment also contributed to the way some participants viewed and responded to cyberbullying. At an urban high school, students discussed cyberbullying, but were more concerned about the significant levels of street violence in their communities that was influencing their daily lives. One student talked about how that violence in combination with the elimination of extracurricular sports and activities due to budget cuts were contributing to youth participating in more aggressive or irresponsible behaviors. In a rural community, middle school students talked about how high rates of incarceration and enlistment in the military among young adults affected their communities and families.

Cyberbullying Locations

Across all the focus groups, social networking sites and especially those with message boards were the most common locations for cyberbullying to occur. One high school focus group discussed a Facebook group that listed 100 reasons to hate a specifically-named student. A middle school group talked about an incident that stemmed from a student's January 1st Facebook status update where he said he had not showered since last year. As a result, friends jokingly started a separate page asking everyone to encourage him to shower. In this incident, the school learned about it and shut the group down although the student at the center of it was not upset.



Message boards on social networking sites also allow for a wider audience to read and participate in aggressive commentary between youth. Participants noted that the broad exposure of these interactions to peers can often exacerbate a situation as more youth chime in, moving the situation from a single mean comment to a mob bullying incident. Even if only a few peers join in the online conversation, youth reported that many people know about the exchanges, heightening the drama of the situation and the potential impact on the victim.

Two middle school groups and one high school group talked about XBox Live as a place where a significant amount of insults and derogatory comments, including racial slurs, take place. Youth noted that most often players do not know each other since it is an online community game, but that the content of discussion is often vicious.

Impact

Multiple focus groups identified the victims' self-esteem as a primary factor influencing the impact of cyberbullying on individuals. Youth who have lower self-esteem were more vulnerable and likely to take bullying to heart while those who were more confident or had more support were likely to be able to ignore it or recover quickly. Some participants noted that youth who are continuously bullied are sometimes the people who take to the Internet to initiate aggressive behaviors that they otherwise would not engage in. Fewer students identified self-esteem as a contributing factor for bullies to initiate aggressive behaviors. In half of the focus groups, youth noted that maturity levels and a sense of personal responsibility contributed both to how bullies and victims dealt with cyberbullying.

Several youth commented on how age is a factor in their perception of the danger of cyberbullying. One high school senior noted that cyberbullying does not bother her but if it was targeted at her younger sister in middle school it would bother her. She felt that youth should not be online until high school so that they can avoid exposure to these issues. A high school boy discussed feeling like he could handle negative comments being made about him, but if it was said about his friends or younger peers that do not have skin as thick, he felt that he would have to respond to defend them.

Motivations

In four of the six focus groups, youth said that cyberbullying behaviors often started as jokes without malicious intent. Sometimes these circumstances escalated to involve more aggressive behaviors and other times adults learned about activities and overreacted by anticipating more harmful implications. Common motivations for cyberbullying included:

- Youth seeking attention, entertainment, trying to gain popularity and attempts to shape one's reputation.
- Interpersonal conflict that begins offline but when transferred online "explodes" as it is fed by a broader audience and involvement of other youth.
- View that it is just "kids being kids" and these behaviors are going to happen no matter what preventative measures are taken.
- Anonymity of technology allows youth to say things that they would not otherwise say in person; therefore, there is a perceived lack of responsibility for actions.
- Used as another method for attacking self-image of other youth who may get picked on for perceived physical and personality issues. One youth said that you can get picked on for "the way you walk."

Consequences

Most students felt that punitive consequences for cyberbullying are not effective either because students do not think these punishments appropriately match the actions or that they create a larger barrier of distrust between students and school authorities. Suspension was rarely a strong deterrent for cyberbullying. In at least three focus groups, participants said that suspension just allowed the bully to spend more time at home on the computer where he or she was able to continue aggressive or harmful behaviors. The urban high school students felt that suspension was a regular occurrence for many students and therefore often was not viewed as a severe consequence. At that same school, youth noted that arrest was likely the most effective deterrent. The urban middle school was the one exception where the students thought that due to the strict discipline at the school regarding all activities, they were less likely to engage in risky behaviors because they knew that there would be a consequence; suspension was identified as a severe consequence among those youth. One example the students noted was that they are required to move between periods in an orderly fashion by class which reduces the opportunity for socializing and conflict between students. Although they were not witnessing much cyberbullying, even these students felt that the school overreacted to incidents that had occurred.

Solutions

The majority of focus group participants felt that mediation of some sort could be a useful intervention. The reasons that they cited for this were that it would give students a chance to tell their own stories rather than have adults make assumptions about the circumstance and that it would diffuse situations that had developed from misunderstandings or jokes. However, the structure and leadership of mediation was an important consideration for students. Youth participants highlighted traits that they feel are important in an adult who they would feel comfortable going to about cyberbullying: trustworthiness; does not exhibit favoritism; shares background or similar youth experiences; and willingness to learn about the circumstances before judging. Having an adult they trust and who they feel understands them is a determining factor as they consider whether to tell anyone about the problems they are facing.

Youth had mixed reactions regarding the extent to which mediation would help and whether they would want parents involved. Some students said their parents already monitored their online behaviors while others said they did not want their parents to know how to use these technologies or to watch over them. A few students noted that their parents were not a supportive part of their lives and therefore this type of solution would not apply to them. Some high school students said that parents need to get involved when their children are very young (earlier than middle school) if they want to have an impact on this issue.

VI. Potential Action Items

We have an opportunity in Illinois to create solutions that work with youth by conducting awareness campaigns and youth and parent trainings, taking law enforcement action when necessary, and creating partnerships with the cellular and social networking industries to promote safe cyber behaviors, all ideas that came out of the Cyber Safety Summit. Effective implementation of many of these programs require the cooperation of youth. Therefore, during the focus groups youth were asked their opinions about these types of solutions. The following suggestions emerged from both the Cyber Safety Summit and the youth focus groups.

- ✓ **Educate Kids:** Cyber Safety Summit participants stressed the importance of engaging middle-school students to promote “digital citizenship” and empathy between students before they reach high school, when youth are most commonly involved in cyberbullying and sexting incidents.² Accordingly, Summit participants supported the adoption of peer-mentor and peer-intervention programs to help students resolve disputes before they manifest on the Internet. These programs could also provide a constructive way to cope with the consequences of cyberbullying incidents when they occur. Youth focus groups participants widely supported the development of peer-to-peer education and mediation programs, stating that students are more likely to listen to advice about cyberbullying risks and consequences from older peers than from parents or educators.
- ✓ **Get Parents More Involved:** Several Summit participants expressed the view that parents are best positioned to prevent children and teens from abusing available technology, or putting themselves at risk of being cyberbullied. In fact, many Summit participants relayed their experience that parents simply do not believe that their child is engaging in these behaviors. For that reason, many Summit participants supported the development of programs and incentives for parents to participate in educational programs on how to address online aggression. There were mixed reactions from youth focus group participants on training parents about technology and related cyber-activities. Some youth focus group participants felt that their parents were already monitoring their online and cell phone activities, while others were more resistant to informing their parents about activities and educating them about technology. Those students who had defined their relationships with their parents as open or good said it would be fine, and other youth said that they could not talk to their parents about any of these issues.
- ✓ **Train School Officials:** Summit participants stressed the need to enhance the capacity of schools to communicate with students about cyberbullying and to handle incidents when they arise. Many focus group participants had specific people in their lives or at school that they felt they could talk to but that was not always the person the school may designate to handle these issues, which is an obstacle to being able to solve these problems. Youth focus group participants discussed characteristics that they value in a teacher whom they feel they can confide in on sensitive issues, such as cyberbullying. Trust was a key element in youth being willing to talk to adults about these issues. Other characteristics were adults who are calm, trustworthy, “laid back,” have no bias or favoritism to certain students, good communication skills, and no preconceived notions of the situation. Multiple youth suggested principals nominate a specific faculty or staff member who matches these traits, train them on cyberbullying and have them be the primary contact for students.
- ✓ **Assist Schools in Fulfilling Mandatory School Curriculum:** In Illinois, schools are required to provide age-appropriate Internet safety instruction for students in grades 3 through 12, including lessons on recognizing and reporting online harassment and cyberbullying.³ Accordingly, Summit participants supported efforts to assist schools in complying

² According to studies, youth 14-17 years old experience the greatest prevalence of online bullying. Amanda Lenhart, *Cyberbullying: What the research is telling us...*, Pew Internet & American Life Project (2009), available at www.pewinternet.org (citing Amanda Lenhart, *Cyberbullying*, Pew Internet & American Life Project (2007); Sameer Hinduja and Justin Patchin, *Cyberbullying: an exploratory analysis of factors related to offending and victimization*, *J Deviant Behavior* 2008; 29: 129-156).

with this mandate. Specifically, several participants advocated for additional funding and for age-appropriate curricula to be made available for schools. The High Tech Crimes Bureau of the Office of the Attorney General conducts internet safety presentations across Illinois for schools. In focus groups, youth had a positive response to these presentations and indicated they were interested in more opportunities to discuss these issues in a structured environment.

- ✓ **Define and Prohibit Sexting:** In recent months, prosecutors throughout the nation have considered whether to charge minors with child pornography offenses stemming from their distribution of nude photographs of themselves or classmates, also called “sexting.”⁴ Opponents have voiced concerns that any prosecution could unjustly result in the minors’ lifetime registration as sex offenders. In view of that, several Summit participants advocated for a new legal definition and prohibition of sexting. The suburban middle school, suburban high school and rural high school students participating in the focus groups reported sexting among their peers. Students responded that they felt their peers were sexting for attention and because they thought they could get away with it. Students also responded that their peers were “idiots” and should be aware that the images could be forwarded or distributed beyond the original recipient. Also, recognizing a frequent double-standard, youth felt there should be consequences for both the males and females involved but that those consequences should not be criminal charges.
- ✓ **Implement diversion or alternative programs:** Criminal charges are rarely brought against the youth who participate in cyberbullying and law enforcement generally is not referring these cases to alternative juvenile justice programs such as youth courts. Instead, parents or school authorities are left to deal with these issues. In the view of many Summit participants, youth court is well-suited for resolving conflicts that result in on-line conduct. In addition, many youth focus group participants were open to alternative interventions for cyberbullying, including mediation, which generally yield consequences that more appropriately matched the behaviors and often lead to more creative and less punitive solutions.
- ✓ **Implement anonymous and confidential reporting systems:** Several Summit participants supported the implementation of policies and programs to encourage reporting of online aggression in schools. Numerous youth focus group participants indicated that the mechanisms to report abuse or bullying on social networking sites are not adequate. Youth also indicated that when they reported cyberbullying incidents to teachers, these conversations were not confidential and in some instances resulted in additional retaliatory harassment. Twelve states currently require schools to report instances of bullying. For example, in Oregon, a statute encourages victims and witnesses to report cyberbullying by protecting them from any reprisal or retaliation; school employees are immune from any cause of action for failure to respond to any act promptly reported.⁵
- ✓ **Define online conduct that warrants in-school discipline:** Although some schools in Illinois have adopted cyberbullying policies, only a few include provisions that explicitly

³ 105 ILCS 5/27-13.3 (2009).

⁴ Catey Hill, ‘Sexting’ among Pennsylvania teens leads to child porn arrests, N.Y. Daily News, Feb. 4, 2009, available at www.nydailynews.com.

⁵ O.R.S. § 339.362 (2009).

authorize disciplinary measures against students for statements posted online from off-campus locations. These provisions in school policies may be an effective tool to curb the impact of cyberbullying in classrooms. However, they do raise a number of legal questions.

In *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a student's off-campus speech is protected by the First Amendment unless school officials can demonstrate that the student's conduct would "materially and substantially interfere with the requirements of appropriate discipline in the operation of the schools" or "impinge upon the rights of other students."⁶ The Court's decision leaves much room for interpretation. In light of *Tinker*, federal district courts have thus far determined that off-campus policies are unconstitutional.⁷

Despite these rulings on off-campus policies, some school districts have continued to authorize discipline for off-campus speech. In keeping with *Tinker*, some schools have drafted policies that clarify how cyber activities can materially and substantially interfere with the operation of the school or the rights of students. To address these important issues, several Summit participants recommended providing guidance to schools on when they are authorized to discipline students for online behavior that occurred off-campus.

Youth focus group participants indicated that they would support school-based interventions for cyberbullying. Students reported that schools could be part of a multifaceted response. Some students did not feel that there is a role for schools in responding to sexting, indicating that it was more of an issue of self-respect and personal responsibility. Students felt it was an individual choice to get involved in sexting and they were concerned for their personal privacy.

These recommendations are a starting point for development of projects, partnerships and policies to help protect children from online aggression.

⁶ 393 U.S. 503, 509-10 (1969).

⁷ For a review of the case law addressing off-campus disciplinary policies, please see National School Boards Association, *Leadership Insider* (August 2006), at www.nsba.org/SecondaryMenu/COSA/Search/AllCOSAdocuments/LeadershipInsiderAugust2006.aspx.