

Sex, Drugs and Everything Else Teens Keep From Their Parents

How one school district got tough with technology

By Veronica Vidal

Despite increasing attention on the dangers of online predators and safeguarding children and teens who surf the Web, the emerging issue of youth displaying high-risk behavior on social networking sites such as *MySpace.com* or *Friendster.com* has become alarmingly problematic, demanding more attention from school officials, drug prevention advocates and parents.

“The Internet has become such an integral part of a youngster’s life. It’s how they learn, communicate, collaborate and how they interact with the world,” noted Mick Torres, Educational Technology Director for Illinois’ Community High School District 128 in Libertyville, Ill. “They’re able to use digital media to share part of themselves, and it’s easy to use. [They] personalize their page pretty much the same way they personalize their bedroom.”

While the growing number of Internet social sites is championed by online users as a great way to meet people with common interests, discover new music and share information, these sites have also become hangouts where some teens swap stories about drug and alcohol use, or share videos of themselves and friends getting high. With access to groups like



those found on *MySpace* (“Drugs Are Cool” and “Sex, Drugs and Everything Else You Keep From Your Parents”), teens are opening up about their lives, often glamorizing substance use, violence and high-risk sexual behavior. Some teens use the sites to bully classmates or create pages posing as a principal or teacher.



Taking the Internet Seriously

Sixty-four percent of online teens say that most teens do things online that they wouldn't want their parents to know about.¹ Parents and professionals are struggling to find effective interventions in the face of the realities of this new technological phenomenon. In Wisconsin, an 18-year-old faced

charges after posting pictures of several weapons, his potted marijuana plants and other drug paraphernalia on his *MySpace* page. The recent mass murders at Virginia Tech have generated a sense of urgency for parents and professionals to heed forewarnings of trouble in the writings of today's teens. An 18-year-old from Lake County, Ill., was found dead in subzero weather after overdosing on opiates and antidepressants. When asked how many drugs he had taken for his *MySpace* profile, his response was, "Probably more than you."

How One School Took Action

"The point we've been trying to make to kids is that once you put it out there, it's out there forever. Anybody is privy, and part of our obligation is to prepare kids to be successful in life," said Prentiss Lea, Associate Superintendent for District 128. The district, which includes Libertyville and Vernon Hills high schools, gained national attention on shows like Good Morning America, ABC World News Tonight and Dateline as the first district in the state (and quite possibly the first in the nation) to incorporate guidelines on appropriate online activity in its student code of conduct manual.²

Lea explained the need for implementing these guidelines.

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"The most important thing that we do everyday and our greatest obligation is to provide a safe and secure environment for kids," he said, adding, "We have to raise the level of awareness about how to be safe and secure on the Internet and to set some expectations for our students who are involved in our extracurricular activities."

Professionals are struggling with how to address the problem of how students portray themselves online, and how to get through to them about the new reality that colleges and universities, as well as future employers, are increasingly conducting online searches as part of their admissions and interview processes.

District 128 tackled the issue by launching an Internet safety campaign during the 2005-2006 school year to educate students, parents, faculty, staff and the school board on the topic. The district collaborated with local law enforcement and held a workshop for parents and created fake personal pages to show how the sites work. Mick Torres commented that parents were "shocked" at the inappropriate messages and photos the fake pages received from possible predators almost immediately after being posted. For students, activities and discussions were incorporated into the district's character education

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program. The district also conducted presentations for local businesses and the community that included drug prevention professionals.

With the campaign going well, it was a natural next step to incorporate Internet safety and responsibility in the student code of conduct, which happened to be up for its triennial review. With nearly complete support from the community (only one parent opposed, citing it was parents' responsibility to monitor their children), the Code Task Force of students, parents, coaches, sponsors, teachers, administrators and a board of education representative worked closely with legal counsel to make sure they were within the boundaries of respecting the Constitutional rights of the students. In May 2006, they unanimously agreed and added this language to the code:

"Maintaining or being identified on a blog site which depicts illegal or inappropriate behavior will be considered a violation of this code."

"[If they] posted a picture of themselves or other kids drinking, using drugs or involved in a threatening or intimidating behavior — these are things already addressed in our codes," Lea explained. "All we have done is to extend our codes to [the Internet]." The Code Task Force also included guidelines to give students an "honorable out" if they ever face pressure to engage in illegal or inappropriate behavior that could potentially be posted on the Internet. And while the code of conduct must be signed by students participating in extra-curricular activities, other students can still be held accountable if their actions disrupt the educational environment.

Real-Time Results

District 128 and parents have been actively doing searches to make sure students are adhering to the guidelines. "The number of inappropriate photos or information we saw 13 to 14 months ago has almost disappeared," Torres reported. "We have a highly-educated body of youngsters and we have a very active group of parents who take control of these sites and make contact with other parents."

The district is also contacted at least once a week by schools nationwide asking for advice and resources they can use.

For others looking to implement Internet safety strategies in their schools, the district offers this advice:

1. Have conversations through different forums with students, parents and the community about the initiative. Make sure it's the path they want to go down.
2. Always have your powerbase in place to push the conversation forward. Having to develop a policy and the consequences that go with that requires an outlook that is supported by the community.
3. Involve students in the process, not only in revising the codes, but also on the communications end. Including them in media interviews makes a big difference.
4. Develop school-community partnerships. Reach out to local law enforcement and organizations that have the same concerns.

"There are a lot of Internet safety resources online that have nearly quadrupled in the last six months," says Torres. "But start with the community, parent organizations and law enforcement. They may have already taken steps or are on that same path."



For more information about Community High School District 128, visit District128.org (click

"Communications") or e-mail

Mary E. Todorick at mary.todorick@d128.org. See pages 16 and 26 for online resources regarding Internet safety.

References

1. Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005. *Protecting Teens Online*. Medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=62993.
2. Illinois Community High School District 128 Code Task Force, 2006. *District 128's Revised Codes and Conduct: Why the Codes Were Revised and How They will Impact Students*. District128.org.

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