

## School Board adopts cyber bullying policy

Written by Mark Jaeger

Wednesday, 06 January 2010 18:19

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### Advances in technology prompt NOSD to enact protections against abusive electronic messages

The Northern Ozaukee School Board took protection of students and staff to a new realm last month, adopting a policy prohibiting cyber bullying.

The term refers to posting of electronic images or messages to intimidate or embarrass others. The practice has become increasingly common with the proliferation of blogs and social networking sites.

The issue was addressed in an amendment to the board's existing policy governing the use of computers, e-mail and the Internet adopted in 2008.

The amendment defines cyber bullying and outlines how school officials will deal with such infractions.

"Any form of harassment using electronic devices, commonly known as 'cyber bullying,' by students, employees or third-party users of district property is strictly prohibited and will result in discipline," the policy states.

Cyber bullying is further described as the use of an electronic message, image or blog "that defames, intimidates, harasses or is otherwise intended to harm, insult, threaten or humiliate another person."

The policy says students should report violations to a teacher or principal.

"The district may discipline students, up to and including expulsion, and may discipline employees up to and including dismissal, for any violation," according to the policy.

Prior to adopting the policy, board members debated whether it applies only to messages generated from inside the school.

Board member Kendall Thistle worried that the district could be opening itself to litigation by trying to regulate messages not created on district computers.

"Do we want to place ourselves in the path of being taken to court? Do we have the right to suspend a student because a message from little Johnny offended

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little Janie?" Thistle asked.

Supt. Bill Harbron championed a broader perspective.

"It comes down to whether it causes a disruption in the school environment," Harbron said.

He likened the policy to the district's existing prohibition against the use of camera phones inside locker rooms.

"I think it is safe to say that is creating an unsafe or an uncomfortable learning environment. Students have a right to expect us to maintain a safe environment," Harbron said.

Board member Tom Hoffmann, chairman of the Policy Committee that recommended the cyber bullying amendment, said abuses in other schools have opened the eyes of officials to the possibilities.

"I think the feeling is that it is better to have a policy that is too broad instead of not broad enough," Hoffmann said.

Harbron said the policy will be subject to ongoing review to ensure the district keeps up with advances in technology that could pose new threats to students.