

Teachers rule out cyberbullying

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TORONTO — Teachers across Canada have expressed serious concerns about online bullying and will develop a national policy to protect the nation's students and educators when they gather this week in Toronto.

Winston Carter, president of the Canadian Teachers' Federation, says teachers are struggling to catch up in their understanding of the new technologies that can allow bullying to fester among the technically savvy generation that populates their classrooms, but they are preparing to take action.

“It's fair to say that students have gotten there first when it comes to technology, and as educators we are really playing catch-up to the knowledge that's out there,” Mr. Carter said.

“Cyberbullying is without boundaries, it's without borders.”

The issue of cyberbullying — which bullying expert Bill Belsey says can happen over any form of information technology imaginable, including e-mail, cell phones and social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace — has gained a higher profile in Canada after a series of incidents over the last few months.

In February, 19 Toronto-area students were suspended for griping online about their principal. In November, two 13-year-old girls were suspended from a school in Gatineau, Que., for posting a video on YouTube of their teacher shouting at a student. The teacher is on medical leave and the school has since banned personal electronic devices.

Partially in response to such incidents, Ontario introduced the Safe Schools Act at the beginning of June. Under the new legislation, students who engage in physical or online bullying could be suspended or expelled.

But Mr. Belsey, who runs the website www.cyberbullying.ca, says the threat of suspension or expulsion isn't necessarily going to be enough to stop kids from hurting their peers.

He says that kids first need to recognize they're not anonymous online, and "you can't take back" what you say on the Internet.

Mr. Belsey added that cyberbullying can affect students and teachers, kids and adults alike.

"What we write and post and do online has real implications for real people," he said.

"There have been suicides in this country, there are people who are afraid to go to school, there are adults who are feeling overwhelmed and intimidated and don't want to be part of their workplace because of cyberbullying."

Cyberbullying is a particularly dangerous form of bullying because of its reach, Mr. Belsey said.

"One of the things that makes cyberbullying different is the speed with which this can happen," he said. "The bully's audience can be as wide as the Internet itself, where traditionally it might have been in a classroom or a school yard or a hockey locker room."

Mr. Belsey added that anyone who is being bullied online should resist the temptation to reply to the messages, but instead should keep copies of them and tell someone what's happening, whether it's a parent, police, or their Internet service provider.

Mr. Carter says the solution to online bullying must be collaborative.

“This isn't something that should come from the top down,” he said.

“This is a collaboration with the teachers, the parents, the law-enforcement agencies, the policy-makers, the students themselves to ensure that this type of bullying is in check and schools become a safe place for teachers to teach and for students to learn.”

The annual general meeting of the Canadian Teachers' Federation, which represents over 215,000 teachers, will be held Wednesday through Saturday.

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