Bridgewater-Raynham to address school bullying

By Erik Potter
GateHouse News Service
Posted Mar 03, 2010 @ 12:21 PM

Raynham —
Bridgewater Middle School Principal Derek Swenson says he is dealing with more and more cyberbullying issues these days.

"The day-to-day things that get reported to me stem from the Internet and social networking – MySpace and Facebook," he said.

"It's (from) the social networking sites when they're home at night," Swenson said. "That's what's trickling into the schools."

That's one reason why middle school students in the Bridgewater-Raynham school district will be getting lessons this week on how to prevent bullying in their school.

Bullying, especially bullying done online, called cyberbullying, has gotten a lot of attention recently following the apparent bullying-related suicide of a South Hadley High School freshman girl in January.

Jim Jordan, president of ReportBullying.com, will give a presentation to students at Bridgewater Middle School today and at Raynham Middle School on Thursday.

"It's a very serious problem, and I think it's gotten more and more serious because it sneaks up on people," said Raynham Police Chief Louis J. Pacheco.

Jordan makes presentations to schools around the country and in Canada, melding information about bullying and character building with a little bit of magic show thrown in.

Jordan's message is aimed at the bystanders of bullying – students who witness an act of bullying but don't say anything or even nod or laugh in approval.

The program aims to get the students to reject that complacent and complicit behavior and instead report the bullying to a teacher.

Pacheco said police, teachers and parents have been slow to catch on to the new threats that technology has created.

"Every single case, when I've had a parent come in here with a credible threat (of violence against a child), in every case, if you go into the computers, there's been a lot of trash talking that escalates. It becomes part of the problem," he said.

At last week's School Committee meeting, Bridgewater-Raynham Superintendent Jacqueline Forbes told committee members and parents in the audience that "bullying of any kind will not be tolerated" and that the district has two investigators who will look into bullying claims.

David Thomson, principal at Raynham Middle School, said his school has paid a lot of attention to bullying issues in an effort to encourage a school culture that doesn't tolerate it.

He sees it as a necessary part of the learning process, on par with food and clothing.

"Kids need to come to a safe place where kids are going to feel welcome in order to learn."

Other educators are addressing the issue as well.

Following several incidents of cyberbullying at the West Bridgewater Middle-Senior High School in the past three years, police and educators there have joined forces to combat the problem. Led by DARE police officer Ken Thaxter, the partnership seeks to combat bullying online before episodes escalate.

FIVE WAYS TO KEEP YOUR CHILD SAFE FROM CYBER-BULLYING

1. Keep computers public. "First and foremost, all computers need to be in the common areas of the home," said Bridgewater Middle School Principal Derek Swenson. "Giving a student a laptop to go in their room with is a bad idea."

2. Supervise. "Check your son or daughter's text messages once in a while, and let them know you'll be doing that, that this isn't a carte blanche secret communication tool," said David Thomson, principal at Raynham Middle School. "Tell them to leave your phone down here tonight; I'm going to take a look at it."

3. Teach and model good behavior at home. "Stress to the kids that they should not be saying mean or unkind things to people," Thomson said, noting that even unkind messages sent to a third person in confidence have a way of becoming public and causing conflict. "(Parents) should model that behavior and not speak ill of people around their children."

4. Get the software. A good way to monitor and establish limits on computer use is through software programs. McGruff SafeGuard and Net Nanny are tools to limit how much and where your kids go online, and know what they're doing online and who they're doing it with.

5. Educate. Cyber-bullying is not the only danger online. Make sure your kids are also aware of the dangers of Internet predators and that they use social networking sites like Facebook to gain a child's trust and gather personal information. "The best thing you can do is educate your kids about who these people are who are out there," said Lt. Chris Delmonte of the Bridgewater Police Department.

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