Phoebe Prince is loved by her peers. At least, now she is. Hundreds of people have lent their voices to support her on Facebook. Taylor Gosselin wrote, “Your story touched my heart.” Dori Fitzgerald Acevedo added, “I am so glad we are not letting this get swept under the carpet.”

“This” is what is some might call bullicide—suicide by bullying.

Before Phoebe Prince hanged herself, she was a new student at South Hadley High School in South Hadley, Massachusetts. Phoebe was a newly arrived Irish immigrant, but that doesn’t seem to be what ignited the ire of her peers—or her own self-doubt. Instead, Phoebe reportedly dared to date boys whom others thought should be off limits to her.

Girls at Phoebe’s school reportedly called her an “Irish slut,” a “whore” and a “bitch,” viciously harassing her in person and on Facebook. Public documents indicate that at least one student gloated after Phoebe took her own life, “I don’t care that she’s dead.”

Phoebe’s tormentors have since been dubbed the “Mean Girls,” after the clique in the 2004 Tina Fey-scripted movie of the same name. And for the Mean Girls of South Hadley, the consequences of their purported actions have been severe. They are now maligned across the Internet, from postings on Facebook to the comment areas of news websites worldwide.

The Mean Girls, along with two male students, also face an array of criminal charges for allegedly bullying Phoebe Prince. Since then, it’s become clear that Phoebe’s reasons for taking her own life were complicated. She had struggled with depression and had even attempted suicide once before. But the bullying she endured definitely had an impact on her.

New Term, Old Concept

Cyberbullying. The word didn’t even exist a decade ago, yet the problem is pervasive in children’s lives today.

Simply put, cyberbullying is the repeated use of technology to harass, humiliate or threaten. When fingers take to the keyboard, or thumbs type into a cell phone and craft messages of hate or malice about a specific person, cyberbullying is emerging. And unlike most types of traditional bullying, it comes with a wide audience.

“You can pass around a note to classmates making fun of a peer, and it stays in the room,” said Sheri Bauman, a 30-year education veteran who now works as director of the school counseling master’s degree program at the University of Arizona. “But when you post that same note online, thousands can see it. The whole world becomes witness and is invited to participate.”

Anywhere from one-third to one-half of youths have
been targeted by cyberbullies. And those experiences produce damaging consequences—everything from a decline in academic performance to thoughts about suicide.

“Our study of upwards of 2,000 middle school students revealed that cyberbullying victims were nearly twice as likely to attempt suicide compared to students not targeted with online abuse,” said Sameer Hinduja, the study co-author, who is also an associate professor at Florida Atlantic University and a founder of the Cyberbullying Research Center. “Cyberbullying clearly heightens instability and hopelessness in adolescents’ minds.”

Findings like these, and actual deaths like Phoebe’s, lend a sense of urgency to anti-cyberbullying efforts. Legally speaking, those efforts can be tricky for school administrators. The judiciary has long struggled to balance freedom of speech against the darker side of digital communication.

More and more though, courts and law enforcement are sending the message that cyberbullying will not be tolerated. For instance, in March 2010, California’s Second Appellate District concluded that online threats against a student were not protected speech and allowed a civil lawsuit against the alleged perpetrators, their parents and school officials to proceed.

The notion that schools must respond to behavior that takes place off-campus and online may seem like a tall order. But schools are coming to understand that bullies don’t just attack in the cafeteria or on the playground. “Wherever kids go with their computers or phones, which is nearly everywhere, the bullies come with them,” explained Bauman.

A 2010 study by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation found that technology access among children has skyrocketed since 1999. Today, 93 percent of children ages 8 to 18 have computers at home, 66 percent have personal cell phones (on which they are more likely to text than talk), and 76 percent own another multimedia device, such as an iPod.

These tools give them access to a dizzying array of social media. Some of them, such as Twitter and Facebook, are well known among parents and teachers. But others, such as Formspring, fly well below the radar of most adults. Yet it’s sites like Formspring that can create the biggest headaches. Formspring offers its users total anonymity. That makes it at once a huge draw for curious teenagers and a nearly perfect medium for cyberbullies.

Relieving the Drama

The ostensible boundary between off-campus behavior and school life evaporated for Highline Academy, a K-8 charter in Denver, last spring when a conflict fueled by Facebook posts ultimately led to a physical altercation in the middle school. (Editor’s Note: The author sits on Highline’s board of directors.)

“When I looked at the pages, I was shocked by how freely and harshly the kids were talking to and about one another,” said principal Gregg Gonzales.

In the wake of the incident, Highline officials spoke with students in morning meetings and issued a special packet of information to parents and guardians about cyberbullying and Internet safety. Still, a new Facebook page soon appeared, with a growing stream of posts about a student directly involved in the altercation.

“As a community, we needed to step back from the incident and relieve some of the drama,” Gonzales said. He asked every parent in the middle school to support a 48-hour moratorium on Facebook activity at home. He also asked parents to discuss the use of the social networking site with their children.

Gonzales and his colleagues also placed personal phone calls to parents of students who had engaged in the online conversations. “It may be outside our jurisdiction to dictate what students do on their own time, but it was important to let parents know we’d discovered their child had engaged in cyberbullying or inappropriate conversations about the incident,” Gonzales said.

As it turned out, his initial shock about students’ online behavior was shared. “Numerous parents came back to us and said, ‘I had no idea’—no idea

Is Cyberbullying Largely a Problem for Girls?

Conventional wisdom suggests that boys are more likely to bully in person and girls are more likely to bully online. Sheri Bauman, the director of the school counseling master’s degree program at the University of Arizona, cautions against jumping to conclusions. “Cyberbullying is a new area of inquiry, and it’s just hard to draw definitive conclusions from the research that’s currently available,” she said.

What is clear is that cyberbullying, like traditional bullying, is about power. “Students attempt to gain social status through cyberbullying,” said Bauman. Sameer Hinduja of the Cyberbullying Research Center says that gaining social status often means tearing someone else down, and boys and girls often do that differently.

“Girls tend to target each other with labels that carry particular meanings for them,” said Hinduja. Labels like “slut,” “whore” and “bitch”—the epithets reportedly used against Phoebe Prince—are common within girl-to-girl cyberbullying. The main tactic of boy cyberbullies who attack other boys is to accuse them of being gay. “The amount of abuse boys encounter because of real or perceived sexual orientation is pronounced,” Bauman said.
what their child was doing online, or even that they had a Facebook page.”

Such responses are typical. A 2009 study from Common Sense Media found that parents nationally underestimate children’s use of social networking sites and often are unaware of how they are used. Thirty-seven percent of students, for example, admitted they’d made fun of a peer online, but only 18 percent of parents thought their child would engage in such conduct.

“The episode taught us—teachers, parents and students—that practicing respect, one of our core values, means practicing it wherever we are, at school or online,” Gonzales said.

Getting in Front of the Problems
The Seattle Public School District took a proactive stance last year when it launched a pilot curriculum to prevent cyberbullying in its junior high and middle schools.

Mike Donlin, the senior program consultant who led the curriculum’s development, says the district chose to create its own resources rather than use off-the-shelf products. This ensured that the resources would be easy to use and easy to integrate into existing curricula. “There also was the issue of cost,” he said. “We believed we could create something great with far less expense.”

Unlike many programs that address cyberbullying piecemeal—focusing only on Internet safety skills, for example—the Seattle curriculum attacked the entire problem. It did this by using the four most promising prevention practices. They are:

- Debunking misperceptions about digital behavior;
- Building empathy and understanding;
- Teaching online safety skills;
- Equipping young people with strategies to reject digital abuse in their lives.

The Seattle curriculum also recognizes the importance of parental engagement by offering take-home letters and activities.

Academically, the curriculum focuses on writing. This not only boosts student skills in a tested area, it also allows the program to discard common, ineffective practices. Instead of asking students to sign a pre-crafted pledge, for example, the curriculum prompts children to write personal contracts for themselves about their online behavior.

The curriculum also educates teachers about cyberbullying and introduces a language they can share with their students. “We couch lessons in a way that resonates for teachers, too,” said Donlin. “So, we use the Golden Rule. We use the old-fashioned mantra ‘don’t kiss and tell’ to address sexting.”

Still, some information requires repeated explanation. Some might wonder, for example, why the curriculum prompts students to try to see things from the bully’s perspective. “A single student can be a victim, a bystander and a bully in different moments,” Donlin explained. “Maybe a child was bullied at school this morning, but gets online later and bullies back. Their roles shift. Technology gives them tremendous freedom and power to reach out and touch in nearly every moment, for good or evil.”

Learning how to resist the urge to “bully back” is important for many students, as is un-learning some common myths about being online. Kids often think they can be anonymous on the

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DISCIPLINING BULLIES

Not As Easy (or Effective) As It Sounds

Advocates have spent years trying to get schools to take cyberbullying and its traditional counterpart seriously. It’s no wonder then that so many express support for increasingly harsh consequences being handed out across the country.

When a prosecutor charged nine students with criminal offenses related to bullying Phoebe Prince, Elizabeth Engleman, director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, called it a “watershed” moment. Across the country, in Seattle, after more than 20 students were suspended for taunting a classmate online, Mike Donlin, a senior consultant in the district, called it “a clear message—hard and fast.” Many states and districts mandate required punishments like suspension or expulsion, and some are now considering heftier use of criminal penalties as well.

Sheri Bauman, the director of the school counseling master’s degree program at the University of Arizona, encourages everyone to take a deep breath.

“Pushing children out of school isn’t going to help,” she said. “Bullying, online and in person, is rarely solved with punitive methods. Children who are punished typically persist; they just change their methods.”

Bauman, who has studied cyberbullying and its traditional counterpart in the United States, Australia, Canada, Germany and Norway, points to different models of justices. She prefers the “Method of Shared Concern,” which involves all parties—the bully, the victim and the bystanders—in examining and addressing conflicts. However, this needs to be done by educators who have been properly trained or it can make the situation worse (see Recommended Resources, p. 46).

“We need to expand our toolbox,” Bauman said. “Punishments may make us feel better or safer, but other options can yield actual results.”
Internet, or that what they do there is fleeting. Both ideas are mistaken. The Library of Congress, for example, is archiving all Twitter messages sent from March 2006 forward. Even the “mean tweets” will be immortalized for future generations. “Everything students do online reflects on them, permanently,” says Donlin.

For teachers, a common stumbling block revolves around First Amendment protections and discomfort about corraling students’ speech. Donlin believes that should not be a problem in most cases. “We have Second Amendment rights to possess weapons, but that doesn’t mean we allow children to bring guns to school,” he observed. “When it comes to cyberbullying, we’re still talking about school safety.”

The new curriculum hasn’t been a total remedy for Seattle's schools. In January, one middle school suspended two dozen students who “friended” or became “fans” of a Facebook page maligning another child. It was a reminder that, despite the best efforts, a school’s struggle against cyberbullying never ends. “Phoebe Prince was lost earlier this year,” Donlin said. “There were others before her. ...Their names and stories faded. My fear is that we’ll forget the lesson learned—again. We have to teach this now.”

Recommended Resources

Books

*Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying* by Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin
Endorsed by the executive directors of both the National Association of Secondary School Principals and National Association of Elementary School Principals, this exemplary volume provides information, tools and strategies that can be used in every school. $29.70; ISBN-10: 1412966892; ISBN-13: 978-1412966894

*Teen Cyberbullying Investigated* by Thomas A. Jacobs, J.D.

Online

*A Thin Line*
www.athinline.com
A great marketing campaign from MTV addresses the “thin line between what may begin as a harmless joke and something that could end up having a serious impact on you or someone else.” The campaign stands apart from other programs directed at youth, thanks to edgy design, engaging use of multimedia and unsanitized treatments of digital abuse.

*Bullying in Schools and What to Do About It* www.kenrigby.net
This online resource from Ken Rigby, an author, former teacher and counselor, offers an array of free materials and research briefs dealing with the Method of Shared Concern, a restorative-justice approach to bullying interventions.

Cyberbullying Research Center www.cyberbullying.us
The Center provides constantly updated information about the nature, extent, causes and consequences of cyberbullying among adolescents. Its website offers an array of downloadable resources—from word-search activity sheets to discussion guides for use at home and school.

*Cyberbullying: Understanding and Addressing Online Cruelty* www.adl.org/education/curriculum_connections/cyberbullying/
This online-only curriculum from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) offers age-appropriate lessons for early, middle and upper grades and squarely confronts the bigotry that can fuel cyberbullying. The ADL, which has regional offices across the country, also offers related workshops for school communities.

Middle School Cyberbullying Curriculum www.seattleschools.org/area/prevention/cbms.html
This pilot curriculum from Seattle Public Schools incorporates the most promising practices of prevention—and strengthens students’ writing skills at the same time. Its focus on parent engagement also makes the curriculum a standout.

*NetSmartz* www.netsmartz.org/resources/reallife.htm
NetSmartz, a partnership of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, gives much attention to online predators and also offers scenarios specifically about peer-to-peer abuse, brought to life in cartoons and supplemented by activity sheets.

*Wired Safety* www.wiredsafety.org
One of the longest-running online safety organizations, Wired Safety sponsors the often lauded Tween and Teen Angel programs, which train and empower youths to lead presentations about responsible technology use for other children, parents and teachers. Get your students involved, or find an Angel who can meet with students in your school.