



# CYBERBULLYING ROCKS SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL

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In the early morning hours of Wednesday, March 23, a student from Minnetonka High School anonymously created a Twitter account with the promise of identifying—by name and detail—girls whom the list's student creator labeled as sexually promiscuous. Within 24 hours, nearly 400 people were following the account.

"It was shocking," Minnetonka High School Principal Dave Adney told Patch the following day. "But we knew how to react to this [and] we are very proactive. We don't scramble for answers very often."

The countdown from 50 had named two female students before the Twitter account vanished that Wednesday evening.

## NEW WEAPONS, SAME DEFENSE

School administrators point out that the Internet inherently creates an exponentially larger audience for bullying.



"Years ago when email was first coming out, someone would say something bad about someone else on email. They then forward to a couple friends or it gets passed around that way," said Dave Eisenmann, Director of Instructional Technology and Services for the Minnetonka School District.

"We're not sweeping it under the rug," Adney said. And just two days later, on Friday morning, a student came to Principal Adney to take responsibility for the posts.

Minnetonka Schools Spokesperson Janet Swiecichowski agreed that while technology has grown more sophisticated, so has so-called cyberbullying.

"There is much more damage done and the consequences are greater," she said.

While the forums have changed, the school combats this kind of bullying with the same method they always have—teaching and promoting mutual respect, tolerance and responsibility.

"It's a chance to educate, a chance for kids to learn, a teaching moment," Adney said. "The message is be careful what you put up there, it will be there forever."

Minnetonka schools have also been actively implementing a district-wide cyberbullying program in all grade levels, even for kids as young as five-years-old. Kindergartners are taught about password safety, and fourth- and fifth-graders are taught to ignore cyberbullies and to report incidents to adults.

Reporting it was exactly what students in this recent episode did, Adney pointed out.

"That gives me in great faith in what we are doing here, and in our student body and in our community," he said.

At the high school level, students are taught technology literacy standards that include information on cyberbullying and Internet safety. Also, Minnetonka High School students learn about healthy relationships and mutual respect in health class—a class taught to every student every year.

"We need to be sure that kids know there is support here for them. People who care for them," said Swiecichowski.

## **FILLING THE GAPS**

Even with the most effective anti-bully program, educators agree bullying will happen in schools. Many were "there" for the two young women bullied during Wednesday's Twitter incident, school officials said, as evidenced by the nearly 100 tweets aimed at this Twitter bully. Most chided the account holder, saying this list was over the line.

The takeaway lesson, Adney said, is just how important it is for parents and caregivers to know what's going on with their kids.

"I think we do a great job as a school district, building a culture, trying to teach our kids good ways to deal with this. But it still comes back to the home life," Adney said. "If you don't know who your kids are talking to or what sites they are on, you're not doing your due diligence."

And Minnetonka schools do have a way for parents to do this due diligence. The district has a free Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) series on cyberbullying and Internet safety for district parents.

Joe Rolander is one district parent who showed up at a recent series meeting. He has four children in Minnetonka schools—ages 9 through 12. At that meeting earlier this month, he told Minnetonka Patch he's worried about the wide reach of cyberbullying.

"What it comes down to is the foundation of teaching the kids to respect others. To respect what's right and wrong, instilling that foundation," Rolander said. "This can come back and ruin people's lives."

## **CUTTING OFF THE BULLIES**

School officials discovered the latest incident when two seniors came into Adney's office and told him.

"They didn't even know anyone involved, but that's the kind of culture we've got here," Adney said.

IT professionals, media coordinators and even the police liaison at Minnetonka High School quickly went to work on the problem, attempting to narrow in on the tweeting perpetrator.

"We tried to limit the damage from this and we were able to collect a lot of good information so we could shut it down," Adney said. "This was a very poor choice on somebody's part."

"It needed to be addressed immediately. We know how fast the Internet can fly. So the really quick reaction on the part of the administration and the staff to say, 'Who do we need to talk to in the student body?'" Swiecichowski said.

The consequences for bullying—in any form—can range from a warning to expulsion, school administrators said. They stressed, however, that the consequences for this week's act will be, among other factors, based on the student's prior record at the school.

Principal Adney also said that the focus shouldn't be on the consequence, but on ensuring such behavior doesn't happen in the first place.

"Our goal is not the penalty. Our goal is to change the behavior," Adney said. "The final goal is to build a respectful climate in the school. At the end we want all parties to think it was fair rather than extreme."