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## **Cyberbullying bill goes to governor as parents look to keep children safe**

**Parents looking for help with cyber safety Recognizing the need to know; new state bill targets cyberbullying**

*By Diana Dillaber Murray, The Oakland Press*

Sunday, December 21, 2014



Back when Danelle Gittus and Jean MacLeod were kids, their parents only had to worry about protecting them as they played outside with kids on their own block and at the neighborhood school that made up their small world.

Today, Gittus is the mother of two, and MacLeod has three children. And like the majority of parents of today, their children's worlds no longer are confined to a neighborhood but global via the Internet, making the job of parenting much more difficult, said MacLeod, who is social media specialist at Oakland Schools.

However, MacLeod and Gittus, director of communication services at Oakland Schools, say if parents have the proper tools, they can help their children take advantage of all the positive

benefits of the digital world and avoid the negative aspects of the social media that continues to grow and morph, attracting children to use it, sometimes in unwise ways.

While the internet offers so much more that can benefit children, “there are no safe places anymore when they are immersed in the digital world,” said MacLeod. She said parents can’t leave it up to schools; they need to understand and keep up with all the apps, chat rooms and social media available to their children as they use their devices at home or with friends.

“In 1995, a few friends at school would know about a mistake. Today, the entire world can know about it and it never goes away. Bullying takes place online and is farther reaching,” said MacLeod. However, she said parents also need to ensure that if a child does make a mistake or is victim to bullying that they don’t take it as devastating.

## **Your brand starts early**

MacLeod advocates that parents start early teaching their children how to use the social media in positive ways, for example to build their “brand” by always presenting positive aspects of their life. This will help them for college admissions and future jobs.

Because social media is new for many parents, “there are no rules or guidelines because we as parents are so far behind the children,” MacLeod.

In that light, the Oakland Schools officials plan to offer a variety of those tools and how to use them at the “Tweens, Teens & Social

Media” seminar planned for parents and teachers throughout Oakland County from 7 to 8:30 p.m. Feb. 11 at Oakland Schools, Pontiac Lake Road in Waterford Township.

In November, the topic was offered in one workshop out of several at the Western Oakland County Parenting Fair. But since then, publicity over student sexting and terrorism issues involving social media has created a demand from parents for help in preventing such problems. What students post in the social media on the internet from home often comes back to the schools.

This week, the Michigan Legislature passed a bill that includes cyberbullying in the anti-bullying policies and data collected. Under the bill, which was sent to Gov. Rick Snyder for final approval, schools would have to report information about cyberbullying to the state.

Supporters say bullying done through social media, texting and instant messaging is probably more prevalent now than physical bullying.

## **Threats**

For example, a 17-year-old Brandon High School senior [was charged with two 20-year felonies](#) — making a terrorist threat and using a computer network to commit a crime — in connection with [threatening posts made on the After School](#) app, [that has since been removed by Apple](#) from its app store.

A total of [17 threatening posts and images against the Brandon School District](#) were made on the app, which was downloaded by 450 students, many of whom stayed home the next day. The student’s attorney said the boy was reacting to anonymous bullying on the app.

Brandon school Superintendent Matt Outlaw said he is pleased to hear about the program being offered by Oakland Schools.

“As parents and as school leaders, our jobs are certainly much tougher than they used to be. Assistance with awareness will certainly help us all. We will be doing follow-up awareness pieces for our students, staff and parents when the time is appropriate,” Outlaw said.

“I think that it is important to remember that, in spite of the mistakes of a few, 99 percent of students are great kids focused on getting a good education. I was really proud of the maturity shown by the Brandon students over the past week,” Outlaw said.

Rochester school district is holding a program on internet safety for parents and community members from 7 to 8:30 p.m. Jan. 7 at Stoney Creek High School. Entitled “Public and Permanent: Evolve from overwhelmed to empowered.” the program will provide greater awareness of negative, irresponsible, and malicious digital behaviors and trends. It will also offer the method to reduce the risk of becoming a victim of a cyber crime, cyberbullying, and digital exploitation.

“Now everything is instantaneous”

Samantha Phillips, parent of two middle schoolers and president of the Rochester Community Schools PTA Council, said “I don’t think it is comparable to when I was growing up. I feel it is a constant effort to keep up with what is going on on the internet, helping children make good choices.

“There are so many benefits to it, you don’t want to scare them

away from it, but you have to be diligent with it. It is an everyday task to help them make good choices” when there are people involved in social media luring them to do otherwise, Phillips said.

“I think the Rochester district has done a fabulous job,” in teaching children how best to use the internet to benefit their education and providing ongoing programs to talk to them about safety.

To Laura Hodges, of Sterling Heights, whose children attend Troy schools, just the few years difference between the time her daughter Gabrielle, 19 and a junior at the University of Michigan, and her younger sons, Sean, 13 and Stefan, 10, the increase in the number and uses of social media has been dramatic.

New apps and sites fly under the radar for many.

“It has been profoundly obvious,” Hodges said of the changes in just a few years. For the mother, it seems as though two decades passed between her children rather than six years.

“When my daughter wanted a play date, we arranged it over the phone with a mother,” Hodges noted. Now the kids are chatting and making plans and go to her and asking if their friends can come over now.

“Now everything is instantaneous,” Hodges said.

### **Fast-changing and dangerous**

When Hodges’ daughter was young, she was mostly using Facebook. The myriad of other forms of communication now commonly used by youths and seemingly multiplying every month, were not available then.

Even so, students could post things on Facebook that could be

hurtful to others.

“We had a close bond,” said Hodges, and she shared her concerns and values with her daughter about what was posted on Facebook.

“There are so many social and ethical responsibilities, we can’t just turn them loose with and not think about what could happen if I were 12 and didn’t realize” what harm could be caused, Hodges said.

“The second a child is allowed to access social media or the internet, you have to put out rules and guidelines,” Hodges said.

“Social media is as dangerous to our children as fire and gasoline. I take it very seriously. Kids don’t come programmed to handle social media.”

One thing Hodges stresses, for example, is don’t air dirty laundry about others online. She also warns her children about predators online and keeps open communication with them so they will tell her if they come across anything or anybody that is inappropriate.

“When a lot of us come from a generation without social media, it is our obligation to keep caught up,” Hodges said.