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Free Tipline Lets Students Use the "Cyber in Their Pockets"

By Becky Lewis
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The forms come into the school's Tipline portal on a steady basis, two one day, three the next. Similar in content, but different enough to tell they come from different children. They all report the same problem: bullying. Bullying in the third grade. No wrongdoer is named, but the tips provide enough information to let administrators know there's a problem they need to address. A problem that could have gone unnoticed without the help of the Kentucky Center for School Safety's STOP! tipline.

Implemented as a pilot project in late 2013, the free tipline service will continue rolling out to schools across the state throughout 2014. The Kentucky Center for School Safety (KCSS) provides STOP! (Safety Tipline, Online Prevention) through a portal on its website that serves as a central "post office," with tips going directly to designated individuals at participating schools. KCSS received no additional funding nor hired any additional staff to use in implementing the project.

"We are not going to be the Cyber Tipline Police. We're just the conduit," says Karen McCuiston, director of the KCSS Resource Center. "We've been working on this for several years, because schools wanted to implement something like this but they had no funding for it. If they funded this, they would have to cut something else. We already pay a small hosting fee to run the website, and we worked hard to find a way to make STOP! work through that portal."

KCSS originally considered creating a database, but decided against it due to concerns about hacking. Additional concerns about confidentiality led to the development of forms that send the information straight to designated individuals at the school. (Some school districts are also working on partnerships with their local 911 dispatch to implement 24/7 monitoring.) McCuiston emphasizes this is a tipline, not a suicide hotline nor a replacement for 911.

"I love that our children have grown up with 'cyber in their pocket,' but they've gotten to the point where they don't know how to communicate face to face. Since that's how they are, we have to meet them there. Some schools have tip boxes in the cafeteria or the library, but we know that kids like to use their phones, their tablets, their computers.

RESOURCES:

- Prepare
  - For-Profit Organizations
  - Universities
  - Nonprofit Organizations
  - Free Resource Materials
  - For-Profit Resource Materials
- Respond
  - For-Profit Organizations
  - For Profit Publications
  - Free Resources
- Recover
- Professional Associations
- Federal Government Agencies
- NIJ/NLECTC Products
- *TechBeat* Articles

SUCCESS STORIES:

- After the Shooting Stops
- Anonymous Reporting and Prevention Platform Helps Stop Trouble Before It Starts
- Carroll County Involves Officers in School Patrols ...and in Classrooms
- Course Teaches Officers How to Administer Aid, Improve Survival
- Connecticut Town Adapts Technology for School Safety
- FBI Promotes Partnership Approach to Planning for Active Shooter Incidents
- Finding Ways to Maximize Limited Resources
- Free Tipline Lets Students Use the "Cyber in Their Pockets"
- The Immediate First Responder
- In-depth School Safety Audits
- It Takes a Village ...
- Meeting An Active Threat Head-On
- Municipal Workers Watch Over Neighborhood Streets
- Police Outfitted With Mass Casualty Trauma Kits

Now they can leave tips 24/7 and they don't have to worry about whether someone will recognize their handwriting or try to figure out what to say to a counselor," she says. "We feel this could be game-changing. They can tell about their problem or try to help someone else."

Although the tipline can be accessed through the KCSS website (http://www.kycss.org/stop/index.php). which leads to links for each participating school district, the main entry to the portal occurs through a replication of the STOP! logo on each school district's website. McCuiston says a lot of effort went into making the portal easy to navigate, with separate forms for tips on bullying. violence and other issues; these forms include both drop-down menus and free form text fields. Although built mainly for the use of students at all grade levels, school staff and the community at large also can access STOP! through a school district website. KCSS also provides a number of supplemental resources to participating schools, including both black-and-white and color versions of a brochure. posters, a PowerPoint presentation, a video, a routing list and more. Feedback from the seven pilot project districts – which range from larger districts with multiple high schools to one of the smallest districts in the state. from an affluent district to one where nearly all of the students receive free lunch – have helped fine-tune STOP! prior to its more general release. No school district can come online with (out) first going through training, and McCuiston says KCSS has a waiting list of schools that want to take the training and start using STOP!

"We're excited that we're giving schools one more piece of a comprehensive school safety program, but it is just one small piece. If you put this up and think that's all it takes, you are missing the mark so widely," says McCuiston, who had just started a position as Public Relations/Grant Writer with the McCracken County School District when the Heath High School shooting took place in 1997. A young man there killed three students and injured five others.

"We did have a lot of people tell us that you're just asking for problems," she says. adding that KCSS carefully vetted STOP! through its lawyers before launching the project. "At the end of the day, I just keep seeing a child who couldn't report something. If this makes one child feel that somebody did something to help them, we've succeeded. We feel it can be revolutionary if kids use it. Maybe some of them will be able to say that it really made a difference."

For more information on the project. contact Karen McCuiston at (270) 809-5091 or email kmccuiston@murraystate.edu.

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