

“Retweet Does Not Imply Endorsement”

The Logic of Cyberbullying in Schools

**A Teaching Case From the Strategic Training Initiative
for the Prevention of Eating Disorders**

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SYNOPSIS

What to do about bullies in school? Or, thanks to ubiquitous Internet access even for middle-schoolers, what to do about *cyberbullying*? Hazel O’Leary is a veteran nurse at Franklin Middle School in Franklin, a largely working-class city in the fictitious U.S. state of Columbia. An eighth-grade girl crying in O’Leary’s office after school precipitates a series of trial-and-error measures both by O’Leary and her supportive principal, Jamal Morden-Jones. Even though there exists a district-wide “Franklin Official Bullying Prevention and Intervention Program Guide” that supposedly contains all necessary guidance on this subject, O’Leary and Morden-Jones still find themselves scrambling to put together an effective response.

“Retweet Does Not Imply Endorsement” reveals, in narrative form, the gap between policy and practice when real life intrudes. In truth, the impressively long and detailed district policy is a work-in-progress still being rolled out across Franklin’s schools, and while principal Morden-Jones and nurse O’Leary are well along in the plan, they still have a school to run day-to-day, while more students are being caught in this web of cyberbullying upset. O’Leary tries to help out, but she is neither trained nor fully conversant with the new world of cyberlife among middle-school kids and its predictable result, cyberbullying. A police sergeant, Julia Wilkers, serving as school safety liaison, has a good head on her shoulders and sound practical advice for Morden-Jones and O’Leary, but she isn’t in the school every day dealing with its upset students, or, as the case may be, their parents, too.

As the case story unfolds, we see how the problem of weight-related bullying targeting one girl affects the whole school community and beyond, distressing students with its cruelty and perplexing staff as to how best to prevent it in the future. School nurse O’Leary and her colleagues at Franklin Middle School try a few solutions that seem promising but fall short of anything systematic or evidence-based. As our case study ends, Hazel prepares to initiate her school’s first foray into the world of logic models for public health program planning.

Acknowledgments and Funding

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Hazel O’Leary – *Longtime school nurse at Franklin Middle School, studying at night for a master’s degree in public health*

Jamal Morden-Jones – *Principal at Franklin Middle School, also known as MJJ*

Julia Wilkers – *A sergeant and school safety liaison officer (SSL) in the Franklin Police Department*

Also appearing or mentioned:

Marco di Sapienza, Rosemary Gomez-Lina, Eleanor Okondo, Valerie Benka, Margaret Angelo – *eighth-graders at Franklin Middle School*

Walt and Betty Benka – *parents of Franklin eighth-grader Valerie Benka*

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“RETWEET DOES NOT IMPLY ENDORSEMENT”

The Logic of Cyberbullying in Schools

“We have a policy,” the principal told her. “A very sophisticated policy. Twenty-five pages long, worksheets, supplemental reading. I’m still working my way through the supplements.”

“What does it say about something like this?”

They leafed through it together, on opposite sides of the principal’s desk: He, sitting, since the desk was his; she, the school nurse, standing, craned over the booklet splayed on the wooden surface.

“Not much, apparently. It would seem that each time there’s the word ‘bullying’ there’s a phrase ‘and cyberbullying.’ Sometimes in parenthesis.”

“Anything about where it happens? School grounds? School trips, sanctioned events? What if it’s kids in the same classroom, texting or Facebooking from home? On vacation?” She’d read it the week it came out, last spring, but all this time later it was hard to remember its nuances.

“I admit it’s not clear,” the principal said.

“Maybe the district lawyer can help?” the nurse, whose name was Hazel O’Leary, asked.

“Can you imagine? Going to her each time there’s a student tweeting with a mean hashtag? Soon that’s all she’d be dealing with.”

“All I know is I have a 13-year-old girl sobbing in my office after last bell, and although we all know there’s a no-tolerance policy on bullying in school, I don’t know a thing I can do about it.”

Normally you wouldn’t have to, or at least not on your own, the principal said but just to himself. We’d have Janice, who was school counselor, on the case. But Janice had been on leave for a month since a car accident put her in the hospital. Not that Janice necessarily had the answers, either.

“Have you tried talking to the girl?” the principal asked. “The one tweeting the stuff about her being too fat for her jeans?”

“She says it’s Eleanor Okondo and that crowd,” O’Leary said. “But we can’t be sure. The tweets come from someone who calls herself ‘TaylorsBFF.’ There’s no name. It references Franklin. What, do we subpoena Twitter to get a name?”

O’Leary had been school nurse at Franklin Middle School, in Franklin, 10 miles from Hamilton, the state capital of Columbia, for almost 20 years. Her youngest of three children had graduated the year before. As a dedicated nurse rarely called on for administrative or committee work, it had left her with a certain naiveté, perhaps, about how things really worked at the district level. She might have meant it, about getting a subpoena forcing Twitter to expose the cyberbully in their midst. But probably she knew as she said it she was being unrealistic. In any case, the principal reminded her.

“I don’t think it works that way, Hazel. What makes her think it’s Eleanor?”

“Kids just know these things. That handle, TaylorsBFF or whatever. Someone in this middle school, obsessed with Taylor Swift.”

“That’s a hundred girls in the school,” the principal said. He asked for the booklet from Hazel, who had since sat down in a chair and was flipping through the stapled pages of what announced itself, in red covers, as the FRANKLIN OFFICIAL BULLYING PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION PROGRAM. She handed it back to him, saying she should go. They were no farther along with the issue at hand than when they began an hour ago.

They just hadn’t read far enough. Page 12 of the booklet contained a footnote, with language from the Columbia state legislative act that had prompted the anti-bullying policy, and others like it, in every school district in the state. Right there in Section VII, Part III, it was stated that “any and all” acts “of bullying (and cyberbullying)” were prohibited

at a location, activity, function, or program that is not school-related through the use of technology or an electronic device (whether private, or owned, leased, or used by a school district or school), if the acts create a hostile school environment for the target or members of the community, infringe on their rights at school, or materially and substantially disrupt the education process or the orderly operation of a school.¹

Whoever “TaylorsBFF” was, she or he was breaking the law, as well as violating school and district rules. For all this, she could be punished. At the same time, she was a phantom, a digital creature of the ether, neither flesh nor substance. What was to be done?

¹ Language directly borrowed or adapted from Quincy, MA, school district *Antibullying Prevention and Intervention Plan, 2010-2011*, p. 13: http://quincypublicschools.com/qpsinfo/download/district/support-services/Antibullying_Prevention_and_Intervention_Policy%282%29.pdf

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Public schools in Franklin didn't allow students to use their phones during school hours. Phones had to remain turned off, locked away or out of sight, in bags or lockers; if they were visible for even a second, they could be confiscated. Still, inevitably, they were used surreptitiously for texting and tweeting below desks or in restrooms; but generally most traffic between students at Franklin Middle School was at night, after school, and during weekends. You could make quite a splash on Twitter, especially if you had lots of followers, and most people used their own name. It was better to wait for someone to "follow" you than to follow them first; perhaps that was one way the sobbing student in O'Leary's office, Rosemary Gomez-Lina, had made herself vulnerable. New to the school, she "followed" everybody on Twitter as soon as she learned their names, so that two months into the year she was following 116 students, but only four followed her. Maybe that made her seem unpopular, gauche; drew attention to her in ways she wouldn't have foreseen. She was only thirteen.

On Tuesdays after work, O'Leary joined friends for dinner at one of their houses and a game of bridge. Three other weeknights she was taking classes or studying for her master's in public health: the goal she promised for herself when her youngest left home. Her one night off, she brought her work out with her, disguising names and details of Rosemary's case but otherwise sounding out her friends. One friend asked the obvious question. "Why is an eighth-grader on Twitter?" Another said, "I didn't know thirteen-year-olds had smartphones. Is that common?"

It was common; nearly half the kids that age did. Once you added tablets and other Internet-enabled mobile devices, you got to nearly 100%. And that was true everywhere. Franklin Middle School was not nearly one of the best schools in the state, but also not among the worst. Sports were popular, but the kids who liked school or didn't play sports were largely left alone. It was a faded or fading brick school that looked imposing and impressive when built in 1933, and probably as recently as 1973, too. Once there had been a thriving Ford manufacturing plant and plenty of good-paying jobs in Franklin. Now there was far less of that work or pay, although since the near-crash of 2008 the city had made something of a recovery, due largely to the expansion of the big regional hospital that bore the name Hamilton-West but was squarely within Franklin. No rich families lived in town or ever had, but there was not much poverty either. A working-class suburb through and through, most people lived in ranch homes or simple frame houses with chain-link fence around the yard, where often there was a boat or motorbike parked on the driveway, or the grass; people there did OK. A cell phone was not a luxury item, even among children.

Meanwhile, the principal, Jamal Morden-Jones, finished reading the long district policy and its related documents and wondered if he would have to call the police. Or should he call

in Eleanor Okondo for a conversation? But what would he ask her — if she was “TaylorsBFF” on Twitter? Was that an infringement of her privacy? A “Dear Colleague” letter from the state’s Department of Education sat on his desk, reminding Columbia’s school officials that cyberbullying was something in which the feds — the U.S. Department of Education and its Office of Civil Rights, for starters — took a strong direct interest. Fearing he was in over his head, he thought he might need to call that district lawyer after all.

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Later that evening, home from her evening with friends, Hazel O’Leary worried about Rosemary, an ordinary thirteen-year-old now being mocked, anonymously and online, for being fat. Sometimes the tweets were direct to her, looking like this:

TaylorsBFF @TaylorsBFF 5 Oct
[@RosemaryGL](#) How many pounds U way, fat girl?

Other times the tweets were indirect, but still universally visible and clear in meaning:

TaylorsBFF @TaylorsBFF 27 Oct
[#IknowaFatGirl](#) RosemaryRosemary

When the messages were retweeted, they marked a kind of assent or agreement, not to mention escalation — friends and followers of “TaylorsBFF” sharing the sentiment and piling on, so that all their followers could see it, too. One of the retweeters, however, was a girl whom O’Leary knew.

TaylorsBFF @TaylorsBFF 6h
[@RosemaryGL](#) Hard 2B fat today, or EZ?
Retweeted by [Valerie Benka](#)

For O’Leary, one of the terrible things about these tweets was how they mixed this strange new trend of the digital age, cyberbullying, with age-old issues of weight stigma and eating disorders among girls. At school, what the kids called slut-shaming and sexting was bad enough. But these tweets directed at Rosemary were, to O’Leary, personally wounding. As nurse, she was the school’s principal resource on eating disorders, used to seeing young teens

for bulimia or related problems, as a first step toward obtaining outside counseling. She knew too well how weight teasing or bullying – really, fat shaming – was a trigger for many young people, making kids desperate to try almost anything to lose weight, sometimes pushing them down the path to an eating disorder and, ironically, more weight gain. To see the two issues conflated, one on which she was expert and the other about which she knew next to nothing – cyberbullying – was disorienting. Especially because this student retweeting TaylorBFF’s nastiest insults, Valerie Benka, was a girl she had counseled for her own struggles with binge-eating and purging. O’Leary didn’t want to be calling out Valerie, but felt she had to get involved, that her secret knowledge in some way made her complicit, too. One of O’Leary’s friends had told her, “You’re not the counselor, after all.” But this was a health issue, and she was the nurse.

The FRANKLIN OFFICIAL BULLYING-PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION PROGRAM was, as the principal stated, long, and, seemingly, complete. Its principal charge to the district schools was to create “a Culture of Respect,” and within that direction, allowed significant leeway for principals like Jamal Morden-Jones (known universally as JMJ) to pursue the goal. The official document came out in summer, but work had begun the preceding spring. The first task was devising “a school-wide Definition of Respect.” From that would come, in the year now begun, a number of school- and classroom exercises on “Positive Relationships” and “Resiliency.” A mantra, oft-repeated in the document, was meant to bind it all together in a plan of positive action: “Ignore the message. Don’t ignore the problem.” Resiliency — You could ignore the hurtful remarks and acts of bullies, and become stronger. Positive Relationships — student to student, student to teacher, student to staff — would be the means to address the problem.

The school-wide “Definition of Respect,” developed from April to June by all the students and teachers, had produced this language, which now appeared on handmade posters in every corridor in the building, plus a professionally printed banner in the main lobby:

Everyone belongs. Everyone counts. Everyone is responsible for making it so. We look out for. . . Everybody.

In school parlance or shorthand, the creed had become known as “the everyones.”

JMJ had been pleased with the effort expended by students to come up with this definition and remembered Eleanor Okondo — allegedly the figure behind the cyberbully TaylorsBFF — as having played a quite helpful role. When a student had asked, “Why do we have ‘everyone counts’ when we also have ‘everyone belongs’? Isn’t it the same?” Eleanor replied:

“No, it’s not. We can accept you belong but not pay attention to you, as if your view doesn’t count. We can disrespect you and your ideas, but still know you’re one of us at Franklin. So we need to be clear about it.”

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When JMJ heard from Hazel O’Leary the next morning about Valerie’s retweeting of TaylorsBFF’s nasty messages, he felt the same head-imploding sensation he often experienced since starting to work with middle schoolers — early adolescents, shedding one identity after another — as when trying to imagine how another girl, Eleanor, who waxed eloquent about “respect” could soon be anonymously sliming a new girl in the school for being fat.

O’Leary, in turn, was surprised to hear about Eleanor’s role in devising the school-wide “Respect” definition. Least surprised was a third person in the principal’s office, Sergeant Julia Wilkers, school safety liaison for the Franklin Police Department. But then, she was a cop; her job, JMJ surmised to himself, was never to be surprised by human conduct, depravity, or paradox. He had asked her in on the advice of the district lawyer, whom he’d called last night and who advised a low-key approach. “Call in the SSL,” she suggested. “Talk to her about what’s going on.”

On the one hand, it made sense. Have a conversation; talk through the problem. On the other hand, there was policy. As was true for all district principals, part of JMJ’s performance review (and annual bonus) depended on successful implementation of central administration strategies and initiatives, of which the FRANKLIN OFFICIAL BULLYING-PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION PROGRAM was a key new document. He’d gained high marks from the superintendent for Franklin Middle School’s “Respect” message, which was even covered in the big newspaper in the capital, the *Hamilton Daily Caller*. Like all his Franklin counterparts he was busy that fall rolling out the “Resiliency” and “Positive Relationships” components; where in all this, however, did actual bullying, a genuine incident between children, fit in? Which stage of the process directed the principal to call in the SSL for a chat? It wasn’t clear; not in the document or anywhere else. There was common sense. But sometimes common sense didn’t fit easily into the flow or logic of a policy or program model.

These thoughts JMJ kept to himself — the administrator’s burden, as he saw it, the cross he had to bear. Conversation with O’Leary and Sergeant Wilkers made him feel better. The exchange could be incorporated into policy.

“A cyberbullying needs assessment might be a good idea,” the sergeant said. “A survey for teachers, administrators, and parents. You’ll ask them about incidents abusing the Internet to victimize kids that they’ve seen or heard about, affecting the kids in this school. It will make

the subject less of a surprise to the parents when finally you've got to talk to someone about their kid. They'll know the school is serious; they'll know the kid crossed a line."

"Isn't that what we've been doing already?" O'Leary asked.

"You got the school to define 'respect,'" said Wilkers. "You've put some other words out there, like 'relationships' and 'resiliency.' Those are positive words; they stick. But they don't, on their own, acknowledge bullying, or bad things that still happen to kids. On their own they just might make everyone a little complacent. You say, if you're a typical parent, but there are all these great developments in the school. Respect, resiliency, relationships. Kids are learning it right. And yet you say the bullying continues? This takes away the surprise, the sense that, well, it can't be my kid."

"I'm confused," O'Leary said. "Are we talking about the parents of Eleanor and Valerie?"

"We're talking about all parents," JMJ said, who felt like he was getting the sergeant's drift. "We're not talking about calling out any particular kid or family for any specific incident. Am I right, sergeant?"

"Yes, that's right," Wilkers said, happy to be understood. Not all the principals in Franklin took her seriously, she sometimes felt. Here, with an African-American in charge, it was different.

"I guess I have a confession," O'Leary said.

JMJ, who knew what she meant from O'Leary's words to him this morning, before the officer arrived, put it like this: "Hazel means she screwed up."

"I called a girl's parents," O'Leary said. "Valerie, the girl who retweeted. Since I knew her, knew the parents. I thought we had a relationship."

"I see," Wilkers said, slowly. "And did you? Do you?"

"Maybe not quite the way I thought we did."

O'Leary had tried so hard to be careful. She rehearsed her lines beforehand. She would not — did not — accuse Valerie of bullying. She would not — did not — bring up the fat-shaming that was the subject of the malicious original tweets, or anything to do with weight or body. Instead, she would say — did say — I'm worried about some of the girls and social media. I'm worried about these "TaylorsBFF" tweets picking on a new girl, Rosemary, and why Valerie's retweeting them. I'm worried about kids not knowing the repercussions of their

instinctive electronic behaviors, and I'm calling you informally, unofficially, because we've known each for two years and I was hoping we could work it out together.

"Work out what together?" Mr. Benka, a Ford assembly line supervisor, asked O'Leary.

"What to do about this issue," she replied.

"And the issue is what, exactly?"

"Kids and their electronic devices, not knowing their effects on people."

"Why would we — you and us — work it out? Isn't this something for the whole school? Isn't there a policy?"

"Yes, there is."

"Well, what does it say?"

O'Leary had meant to finish reviewing the district policy by now, but with one thing or another to deal with each day at school, she was only about halfway through. Her answer to Walt Benka did not go over too well.

"Our training is next week."

"Walter, let me talk to her." It was Mrs. Benka, who had answered the phone, then handed it to Walt while she went to get her smartphone and look up her daughter's tweets.

"Hazel, I've scrolled through the last month. I agree we should be paying more attention to this stuff. But there's nothing Valerie's said that's mean or hurtful."

"But there's the retweets," O'Leary said weakly.

"Retweet does not imply endorsement!" Betty Benka, who worked in sales for the Hamilton *Daily Caller*, saw this expression all the time from journalists and media people. Now she fairly roared it down the phone to O'Leary.

Finishing her story for the benefit of Sergeant Wilkers and JMJ, O'Leary said, "This was all last night." "I guess I was freelancing," she said after a silence.

"Well, your intentions were good," Wilkers finally said, and for some reason that broke the tension; all three of them laughed.

"Probably not the worst thing in the world," Wilkers added. "Probably no real harm done, is there? Jamal?"

“I had a call this morning from Betty Benka, just as Hazel promised I would,” JMJ said. “She wasn’t happy, but there’s respect for Hazel going back a long way. I told Betty this is a brave new world, and we’re all doing our best trying to figure it out.”

It was nice, O’Leary reflected after the meeting, that no one was mad at her. That didn’t stop her being angry with herself. She hadn’t known what she was doing; she didn’t know what she was talking about. “Retweet does not imply endorsement”: what a crushing line to deliver to someone who barely understood tweeting or Twitter. That morning Betty Benka emailed O’Leary a list of a dozen famous TV journalists and “personalities” whose Twitter accounts bore some version of this admonition, a list that included, it pained O’Leary to be informed, two of her favorites, Rachel Maddow and Jake Tapper.

“Retweeting does not imply endorsement,” they all said. But what else, in this case, *could* it imply?

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The tweeting continued all week, retweeted by other girls, including Valerie. The school safety liaison, Sergeant Wilkers, had advised against cyber-snooping when JMJ asked if he should be monitoring the situation on Twitter, and so the administration was slow to realize the escalation. (Yet again JMJ wished, as he had since summer when the incumbent retired, that he had an assistant principal to assist him.) A forthright eighth-grader named Marco di Sapienza was not slow. First he went to see O’Leary, who said, “I’m the nurse. You should see the principal.” Then he went to JMJ.

“Rosemary’s getting picked on by these girls,” Marco said.

“What have you heard, Marco?” JMJ asked, carefully.

“It’s what I see on my Twitter.”

He pulled out his phone, scrolling through his feed. “Our school message is ‘Respect,’” Marco said. “But, Jamal, this is not respectful.” It was the kind of school where kids called the principal by his first name.

“I agree. It’s extremely disrespectful. It’s unacceptable. What do you think we should do about it?”

“I think we should talk to these girls. I think you should talk to them.”

“It’s not clear who they are, Marco. TaylorsBFF?”

“Everyone knows who it is.”

“We don’t,” JMJ said. “I don’t.”

Marco seemed surprised and spit out the name without perhaps meaning to. It was not Eleanor Okondo.

“I haven’t heard that name, Marco. I’ve heard others. You see my problem.”

Accelerating into principal-speak, JMJ said, “Kids’ names are always coming to our attention. Sometimes they’ve done something good or bad, sometimes they haven’t. It doesn’t always mean we can approach them. We have to think about what’s fair. I’m not saying you’re wrong, or that I don’t believe you.”

“It doesn’t have to be behind their back,” Marco finally said. “You can call me in, too, the same time you talk to the girls.”

The cyberbullying “needs assessment” survey went out the next week to all the school parents and teachers, a quick turn-around from when Sergeant Wilkers first suggested it. Meanwhile JMJ pondered Marco’s unusual offer of assistance. It appeared that he spoke for a number of boys, some of them the “popular” boys who evidently didn’t like these tweets from TaylorsBFF’s crowd about the new girl, Rosemary. This was strange to him, too. Soon those boys would be of an age where they might cavalierly speak of a girl as ugly, or a slut, but somehow this fat-shaming at this age bothered or unsettled them. Safety in numbers, JMJ thought. He would tell Marco to come in with three or four boys who felt the same way he did. At the same time, so would three or four girls, including the one Marco had named, Margaret Angelo. The ringleader, if it were her, would choose her company. On Friday when he made the summons, JMJ noted that Eleanor Okondo and Valerie Benka were both on that list. Good, JMJ said to himself. Seems like all the right people will be there.

O’Leary agreed, when she read the email from JMJ requesting her presence at the Monday morning meeting, that “all the right people” would be there. And yet. The cyberbullying situation at Franklin Middle School was a total mess that seemed to be worsening. Jamal was a terrific principal — to her mind, Franklin’s best in her twenty years — but making it up as he went along with this situation. She had made it up as she went along, too, and look what good that had done. There was something about involving or summoning the required people — parents, now students — that filled her with dread. So many moving parts to all this — parents and teachers, victim or victims, bystanders, a bully or bullies — all fluid, overlapping categories of people acting, and reacting.

Re-reading the FRANKLIN OFFICIAL BULLYING-PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION PROGRAM document last night, she was dismayed to see how much it prescribed, for offenders, punishment or stern discipline. O’Leary knew enough about bullying to know it had

to be treated with more nuance and insight. Margaret Angelo or Eleanor Okondo, whichever one of them was “TaylorsBFF”: The former had concentration problems in the classroom and a highly negative view of school; the latter, Eleanor, was one of eight children in a struggling family whose dad had recently left home. Proving they were guilty of cyberbullying Rosemary or getting them to admit it, either way, the grown-ups were headed in a direction that O’Leary didn’t see as at all helpful.

And then O’Leary remembered something from her night classes, a reading she’d been given but hadn’t fully absorbed. “The Use of Logic Models by Community-Based Initiatives,” the article was called, its title referring to something widely used in public health and not just for “community-based” programs.² She dug the article out of her bag and began reviewing it, not exactly reading it. . . weekday mornings in her office, there wasn’t the time. The article appeared to outline some basic steps analyzing cause and effect in policy-making, with particular attention to public health, both a diagnostic and a way forward: a planning tool. Perhaps she could forward it in an email to JMJ.

As she went into the Monday morning meeting with JMJ, four boys, including Marco, and four girls, including Margaret, Elizabeth, and Valerie, O’Leary heard something new. Another young girl was in her office, teary and furious. She had her phone in her hand, showing multiple text messages, all of them mean as hell. One message said she was a fatty; another said she shouldn’t be going to parties and eating so much cake and candy. They all came from one girl, Rosemary Gomez-Lina.

* * *

² Kaplan SA, Garrett KE. The use of logic models by community-based initiatives. *Evaluation and Program Planning* 2005; 28: 167-172.

The website of the *Hamilton Daily Caller*, Columbia's oldest daily newspaper (since 1799)

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Franklin Middle School Defines “RESPECT”

By Constance Yee – June 9, 2013 04:18 EST

June 9 (HDC) – As the school year draws to a close, Franklin Middle School principal Jamal Morden-Jones took a visitor through his school and proudly showed off the result of a spring-semester effort that, he said, “engaged the whole school and not just every student but also practically everyone who works here.”

The “effort,” as he called it, is a definition of the word “respect,” which is actually the first part of fulfilling a mandate from the Franklin school district to prepare a comprehensive anti-bullying intervention plan in all of the city’s schools. “Not the dictionary definition of respect,” said Morden-Jones, “but something organic to each school, that bubbled up from the kids themselves and conveys our values of tolerance, inclusiveness, and fairness.”

And that definition, devised by Franklin’s 110 middle-schoolers? “Everyone belongs. Everyone counts. Everyone is responsible for making it so. We look out for. . . everybody.” The students soon began calling their definition “the everyones.”

Morden-Jones described the process by which Franklin M.S. unfolded its “definition.” Each classroom, from grades 5 through 8, devoted an hour at the beginning of the week to discussing the issue broadly in class; by the end of the week, each room was meant to contribute either an entire “definition” or two phrases or sentences that could be part of a larger definition, by any process the teacher and students in that room designed. Some classrooms approached the exercise through student homework, others through essay-writing, one by writing and performing a short play, and one fifth-grade room held a mock election with up-and-down votes. From informal discussion came the formal submissions, and with three classrooms for each grade, that meant 12 submissions presented to the principal’s office by the beginning of the second week.

[ARTICLE CONTINUED ON PAGE B4]

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COLUMBIA DEPARTMENT of PUBLIC HEALTH

Office of the General Counsel

September 3, 2013

Dear Colleague:

The purpose of this letter is to update all public school districts in Columbia of federal requirements and expectations issued by the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) regarding schools' obligations concerning the protection of our students from bullying and harassing behavior. Nearly three years ago, the DOE Office for Civil Rights (OCR) issued a "Dear Colleague" letter on October 26, 2010 concerning these anti-bullying obligations on the basis of sex (Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972); race, color, and national origin (Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964), and disability (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990). At the time all school districts in Columbia were issued via this office with the OCR letter, which provided examples of harassment, and illustrated how a school should respond in each case; and I encouraged you to share the information in this letter widely with your staff. This Dear Colleague letter and other important information are still available on [OCR's website](#).

Two weeks ago, on August 20, 2013, the DOE issued another "Dear Colleague" letter, this time from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), which pertains specifically to bullying of students with a disability. A copy of this letter is attached to mine. Even though it is specific to students with a disability, it should, for purposes of public education in the state of Columbia, be considered to pertain to all students affected by bullying and cyberbullying; not as detailed policy or practice in its specific requirements for assisting bullied students, but as an accounting of the depth and seriousness by which DOE, and CDE, take this problem, and which we expect of all our public schools and its administrators.

To quote from colleagues in the Kentucky Department of Education (<http://education.ky.gov/school/sdfs/pages/letter-from-office-of-civil-rights-bullying.aspx>), "The modes and frequency of bullying have increased through technology such as the Internet and chat boards. As a result, bullying is more pervasive by reaching students even in the once safe home environment. Please monitor student use of your school's resources and the policies for use to ensure student bullying is not facilitated by these modes of communication. You will also want to review your school bullying and harassment investigation and response policies and procedures, in light of this information."

Please do not hesitate to contact this office if you have any questions or concerns about bullying and cyberbullying in schools, and wish to know more about resources to combat these problems and keep our schools safe for all our students, teachers, and staff.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Janet Yu-Phelps".

Janet Yu-Phelps, JD
General Counsel