

news

UBC/SFU research indicates problem in schools across Lower Mainland

Schools combat cyberbullying with video

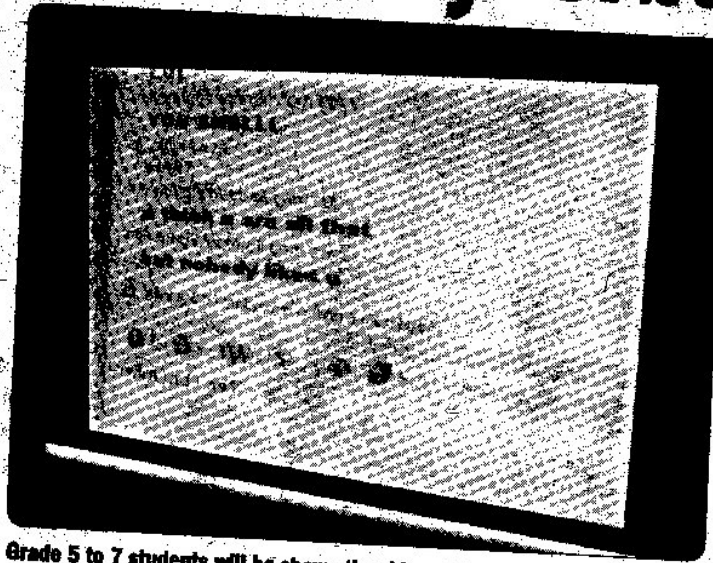
Naofhb O'Connor
Staff writer

Twenty per cent of Greater Vancouver youth have been hurt by cyberbullying, according to research. Seventeen per cent have admitted to cyberbullying and 55 per cent have seen it happen. Such statistics are highlighted in anti-cyberbullying videos being shown to Grade 5 to 7 classes in the coming months.

Killarney secondary school students developed drama skits that were filmed for the "Facing up to Cyberbullying" videos, which are accompanied by lesson plans.

Cyberbullying hit the headlines in recent weeks following the suicide of a gay American university student after his roommate filmed one of his sexual encounters and released it online. Closer to home, a student posted photos of the gang rape of a Pitt Meadows teenager online, while a Squamish student claimed he was forced to fight another student in an incident captured on cellphone video. The principal erased it for fear it would be released on the Internet.

The Vancouver School Board doesn't track cyberbullying statistics



Grade 5 to 7 students will be shown the videos "because they're wise enough and mature enough to understand the issues... and still at a stage where they'll take advice from adults." photo Dan Toulgoet

centrally. Individual schools may keep records of cases they're aware of, while area offices document incidents arising from serious breaches of school codes of conduct.

Lisa Pedrini, the VSB's manager for social responsibility and diversity, said online bullying is a problem based on research conducted by the University of B.C. and Simon Fraser University in the Low-

er Mainland. Administrators also acknowledge the problem.

Elementary and high schools have cyberbullying response guides for administrators and counsellors that provide advice on how to intervene and include samples of letters to parents, as well as information on what questions to ask and how to investigate incidents.

The videos are the latest effort by the VSB to curb the problem.

"What we know from other research on prevention programs is that working with the age group from Grade 5 to Grade 7 is a really good time to give prevention messages because they're wise enough and mature enough to understand the issues a little bit more deeply than younger kids, yet they're still at a stage where they'll take advice from adults and suggestions from adults," Pedrini said.

Students often hit the send button to post material online without considering the impact on the targeted student because electronic communication enables that disconnect, she added.

Chris Atkinson, president of the Vancouver Association of Secondary School Administrators, agrees cyberbullying is a problem.

"It's an element in the conflict situations we come across. It's so accessible and so anonymous and the key is really that parents don't have any idea," said Atkinson, principal at Kitsilano secondary.

"When we meet with a family, we show them a Facebook site or an email account—we have the

student open it up and we show the parents—and they're pretty surprised."

Incidents usually involve a power imbalance such as many students against one, older against younger or bigger against smaller, according to Atkinson. One person befriends everybody and can make a comment to one person on behalf of the group. Conflicts escalate easily.

Students, however, often report cyberbullying incidents to administrators or tell their parents who call the school. Police liaison officers sometimes point out social media sites where students have taken a picture of themselves bullying someone.

Schools follow a conflict resolution model that often involves family members to deal with problem behaviour unless it's particularly egregious.

"Just because it's happened online doesn't mean it's not part of the school," Atkinson said. "The school is a social setting. We involve our police liaison officer in the conversation and we emphasize the people who continue to do it will not be going to Kitsilano."

nocorior@vancourier.com

