

# Reducing Cyberbullying by Amending the Guilford Public School District's Digital Literacy Curriculum

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## THESIS

The Guilford, Connecticut, public school district should amend its curriculum for developing computer literacy in grades K–12 to include comprehensive instruction in digital ethics aimed at teaching students how to safely interact online and reduce cyberbullying.

## BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

Today, an estimated 95 percent of American teenagers use the internet.<sup>1</sup> This high level of digital activity has paralleled a surge in reports of online bullying: The number of individuals who reported bullying online doubled nationwide between 2007 and 2016.<sup>2</sup> In 2017, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System found that an estimated 14.9 percent of high school students were bullied online in the 12 months prior to the survey. Bullying has disastrous consequences: In 2015, nearly 1 in 10 teenagers nationwide attempted suicide.<sup>3</sup> Victims of cyberbullying were approximately 1.9 times more likely than their non-bullied peers to have attempted suicide, and bullies were 1.5 times more likely to have attempted suicide.<sup>ibid.3</sup>

Out of 40 states surveyed, Connecticut ranked in the top 10 in terms in incidence of cyberbullying and online harassment, with one in every six Connecticut students facing online bullying.<sup>4</sup> In June 2018, the Connecticut General Assembly adopted a set of standards designed by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) to help students in grades K–12 develop computational skills and digital literacy.<sup>5</sup> Though the ISTE Standards for Students represent a necessary framework for digital education, they fail to comprehensively address cyberbullying, particularly for the population most affected by it: teenagers.<sup>6</sup> The ISTE standards are structured into specific guidelines for each age group. The term “cyberbullying” appears only once in the entire document in the *Impacts of Computing* subcategory for the age group 5–7 (grades K–2).<sup>7</sup> There is no indication that cyberbullying will be addressed in higher grades.

Currently, the standards are non-binding and instead act as a template for schools to shape their curricula. The Guilford Public Schools district has adopted the ISTE Standards for Students and should be a leader in expanding them to more comprehensively respond to the need to teach ethical online engagement.

## KEY FACTS

- In 2017, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System found that an estimated 14.9 percent of high school students were bullied online in the 12 months prior to the survey.<sup>ibid</sup>
- Victims of cyberbullying were approximately 1.9 times more likely than their non-bullied peers to have attempted suicide, and bullies themselves were 1.5 times more likely to have attempted suicide.<sup>ibid</sup>
- One in every 6 Connecticut students faces online bullying and accompanying psychological effects and stresses.<sup>ibid</sup>
- A 2009 study found that school-based anti-bullying programs are effective in reducing bullying by 20–23 percent.<sup>ibid</sup>

## TALKING POINTS

- Youth involved in bullying, whether as victims or perpetrators, may experience depression, anxiety, interpersonal or sexual violence, substance abuse, poor social functioning, and poor school performance, including lower grade-point averages, standardized test scores, and attendance.<sup>ibid</sup>
- The word “cyberbullying” only appears once in the ISTE standards, which may lead to oversight in the formulation of school policy aimed at cultivating digital responsible in students.<sup>ibid</sup>
- The Guilford Public School District should update the ISTE standards to include students beyond age seven, thereby enabling teenagers—the group most affected by cyberbullying—ways to meaningfully address online harassment.<sup>ibid</sup>

## THE POLICY IDEA

Under the *Impacts of Computing* section of the ISTE Standards for Students, the Guilford Public Schools district should add language affirming the importance of education in digital ethics and cyberbullying in all age groups beyond age 7, with an emphasis on middle and high school students, whose internet use is nearly ubiquitous.

## POLICY ANALYSIS

Amending the ISTE standards will affect a more appropriate range of students. Teenagers are the group most affected by cyberbullying, yet they currently go uncovered by the ISTE guidelines. And teenagers belonging to minority demographic groups are at a greater threat of experiencing bullying. For instance, LGBTQ+ youth are nearly twice as likely to be bullied than heterosexual students;<sup>8</sup> female students are three times more likely than male counterparts to be bullied.<sup>9</sup> and students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) experience more cyberbullying than students without ADHD.<sup>9</sup> These groups are particularly vulnerable to the side effects of cyberbullying, such as anxiety, depression, and academic underperformance.

Because the ISTE standards have only recently been adopted, now is the optimal time to introduce language addressing cyberbullying for older students and reorient schools’ priorities around comprehensive digital literacy. In Guilford’s case, modifying the standards will have significant benefits for relatively low cost. The level of implementation—and therefore discretion over budgeting—is decided by schools. Because the ISTE standards are merely a state-sanctioned framework that schools can opt to appropriate, adopting new language has no financial implications. When individual schools adopt these standards into their curricula, budget projections are consistently low, normally only involving the cost of training educators and research dedicated to pedagogy. However, *not* modifying the standards will have a high cost for students: Relying on standards that lack adequate cyberbullying education will have disastrous effects on teenagers’ well-being.

The ubiquity of social media offers more platforms for bullying to occur, and students must be educated on handling tormentors. Fortunately, a 2009 study found that school-based anti-bullying programs are effective in reducing bullying by 20–23 percent.<sup>10</sup> Amending the ISTE standards to include education on cyberbullying and online ethics may reduce suicides in disproportionately suicide-prone demographics. Without continued instruction in digital ethics in public schools, we can expect a rise in cyberbullying and a rise in the detrimental consequences for those involved.

## NEXT STEPS

To garner support and convince the Guilford Public Schools district to incorporate provisions for comprehensive digital ethics into the ISTE standards, we will work to develop local support. Building a coalition with anti-cyberbullying organizations that have localized knowledge and topical experience, such as the Cybersmile Foundation and the Connecticut Regional Office of the Anti-Defamation League, is important for the successful implementation of this policy. We will also contact the Guilford Education Association, an area teachers union. The coalition will reach out to the Guilford Board of Education and the Guilford Board of Selectmen—the town’s administrative body—to bring this issue to their attention. Ultimately, the Guilford Public Schools district holds the authority to amend the ISTE standards to incorporate cyberbullying awareness and online ethics into the city’s public education system.

Raising awareness and garnering public support are equally important. The circulation of this policy initiative through social media presence and op-eds in local publications, such as the *Hartford Courant* and the *ShoreLine Times*, will inform and generate backing for this proposal from the community. It will also engage and mobilize key local stakeholders around the need for amending the standards in Guilford and Connecticut at large.

## ENDNOTES

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