

Not LOL: Service allows bully reporting by text

PHILIP ELLIOTT, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Students are getting a new weapon to fight back against bullies: their cell phones.

A leading education technology company on Wednesday announced it would give schools a free and confidential way for students to tell school officials via text that they are being bullied or are witnessing bullying. Blackboard's TipTxt program could change the school climate — or reveal just how pervasive student-on-student harassment has become.

"Kids have cell phones. They have mobile devices," said Blackboard chief executive officer Jay Bhatt, whose 9-year-old daughter is already sending digital messages to her friends. "They're constantly interacting with their mobile devices."

Blackboard, which provides products to more than half of the nation's schools, will offer the service for free starting immediately. Texts sent through the confidential program will be routed to school officials, who then will determine how to investigate.

"Things always came (by) word of mouth or in the line coming back from the playground. That whisper down the lane has always occurred," said Thomas Murray, a former principal who now is director of technology and cyber education at Quakertown Community School District in suburban Allentown, Pa. "We want students to do what's right. This is another avenue we can tap into."

Murray said his schools were no worse than most with bullying, but decided to be among the first to employ the Blackboard system.

"Those students who in the past may have been reserved or didn't want to be seen in the office tattling on someone, this gives them a mode to report something," Murray said.

The company has tested the system in a handful of schools. Official declined to predict how many schools would embrace the system or how much it would cost the company. But given the company's reach — 31,000 school districts already use Blackboard products to allow administrators to keep track of student records — it could be an easy sell.

And whether they know it or not, students also know Blackboard's services. Schools use Blackboard services to let students know when classes have been canceled because of weather.

Bullying takes many forms, from face-to-face confrontation to online harassment. Schools have tried to combat such practices, but it's a challenge for educators who

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cannot be everywhere or face more tangible problems, such as truancy or fistfights.

"It's a huge problem, it's got big consequences," Bhatt said in an interview. "One in three young people have experienced bullying."

The Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics reported 29 percent of students ages 12 to 18 reported being bullied at school or online. The department's statistical arm included in its definition of bullying name calling, rumors, physical harm or exclusion from activities.

The Blackboard effort attempts to streamline a system to notify educators about those occurrences.

Students will be able to text a number posted in school hallways or in handbooks with details of an incident. For instance, a student could text that he is seeing someone knock books from another student's hands in the hallway or that someone is walking down the hall crying.

The system would send an automated reply to the student texter that someone is looking into it and then alert a designated school official who monitors the text feeds.

If the school official needs more information, he or she can text back to the student.

"You can start dialoguing with them in two-way text conversation," said Blackboard product marketing manager Jennie Breister. "It's not deemed as a replacement for emergency services. It's there to enhance the security procedures in place and meet students where they are."

Of course, there is the potential for abuse via confidential alerts. School and company officials alike said they would have to weigh what is credible and what is bogus on a case-by-case basis.

"Those are the decisions principals make every day, regardless of the technology. As a principal, you do your due diligence to make sure the investigation is fair to both parties," Murray said.

That's why the company lets school officials communicate back to the student who texts, seeking more information if the student is willing. They do not want bully-reporting systems to become a tool to bully students.

"Anonymous reporting can be misused," Bhatt said. "Anonymous means you don't know where the incident is coming from. You don't have a credible person reporting this."

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