

<https://upfront.scholastic.com/issues/2017-18/100917/should-schools-punish-off-campus-cyberbullying.html#1140L>

Should Schools Punish Off-Campus Cyberbullying?

Whether it's [vicious](#) texts or embarrassing social media posts, experts say cyberbullying is on the rise. And because it can happen anywhere, schools are faced with a dilemma: how to handle cyberbullying that takes place off campus. In recent years, states such as California and Illinois have passed laws allowing schools to punish students for cyberbullying away from school. But free speech advocates have challenged the laws in court. According to a 1969 Supreme Court case (*Tinker v. Des Moines*), educators can restrict students' speech only if it causes "a [substantial](#) disruption" of school activities. So should schools be allowed to punish students for cyberbullying when it occurs after hours? Two experts weigh in.

YES

The Cyberbullying Research Center has been collecting data on online harassment for 15 years. During that time, we've surveyed more than 20,000 middle and high school students from across the United States. And we know from that research how significant the problem is and the impact it can have.

At least one in three middle and high school students have experienced cyberbullying. They are tormented online in ways that can make learning at school extremely difficult. Educators can and should respond to these incidents even if they occur away from the classroom.

Courts have already determined that schools have the right to punish students for their off-campus behavior. That includes what happens online if whatever occurred causes a "substantial disruption" of the learning environment—or interferes with the rights of students. There's no doubt that if young people are being mistreated online, their ability to learn and feel safe at school is disrupted.

When students are cyberbullied, they're usually being harassed at school.

Additionally, research shows that when students are cyberbullied, more often than not, they're also being harassed at school. Online abuse, therefore, can indicate school-based bullying, which schools are required to respond to.

Our research shows that students who believe schools will punish them for cyberbullying are less likely to torment their classmates than those who don't fear punishment. If educators clearly convey that students who engage in cyberbullying will face consequences at school, the behavior will likely decrease.

Teachers and principals are best equipped to deal with issues that come up between students. Of course, it's important that the school's response to online bullying is appropriate and educational. For example, administrators could require students to create anti-cyberbullying materials or give a presentation to younger kids about acceptable online behavior. What they shouldn't do is ignore cyberbullying by students, even if it's done out of school.

—JUSTIN W. PATCHIN

Co-Director, Cyberbullying Research Center

The word "NO" is written in a large, bold, red, sans-serif font. The letters are thick and blocky, with a slight shadow or drop shadow effect, making them stand out prominently against the white background.

Social media makes it easy for young people to connect with their peers anytime, anywhere. Unfortunately, some students use the internet to harass and shame their classmates. We can all agree that cyberbullying is wrong and should never be tolerated. However, it's a matter that should be dealt with by parents—not school officials.

Educators have the authority to discipline students when they violate school rules on school grounds. But if students act out off campus, it's up to parents to decide the punishment. The same should go for online activity. If cyberbullying takes place outside of school hours, it should be handled by parents and only brought to the attention of the school administration as necessary, such as if the victim feels unsafe in class.

When schools start to police social media posts, it could [infringe](#) on students' First Amendment right to free speech. In more than one case, courts have ruled that schools can't limit students' online posts when they're outside of class unless the messages cause a "substantial disruption" at school.

If students misbehave off campus, it should be parents who decide the punishment.

Another concern is that when you create an opportunity for schools to punish students for something that happens on their own time, it can be hard to know where to draw the line: There's a real risk that schools could end up punishing students for things they say online that may be inappropriate, but aren't necessarily cyberbullying.

Teachers and principals work hard to build strong relationships with their students. It would be terrible if forcing educators to hand out punishments for things that happen outside of class damaged those bonds.

Instead of punishing students, a better way to combat cyberbullying would be for schools to teach appropriate online behavior along with explaining why cyberbullying is wrong and how it can hurt its victims. That way, teachers can be educators, not full-time [disciplinarians](#).

—EDWIN C. YOHNKA

Director of Communications and Public Policy, American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois