

# Cyberbullying: A Case Study at Robert J. Mitchell Junior/Senior High School

*Michael J. Heymann, SUNY Plattsburgh, USA*

*Heidi L. Schnackenberg, SUNY Plattsburgh, USA*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Robert J. Mitchell Junior/Senior High School is a small institution located in central New York. Although generally minimal behavior problems occur at the school, currently cyberbullying is on the rise. One of the students, James, was recently a victim of cyberbullying. A picture of him was posted on a social networking site, which initiated a barrage of cruel text messages and emails. Although James didn't tell anyone about the incident, another student complicit in some of the bullying, Sarah, confessed to him. Sarah and James then went to their teacher, Mr. Moten, to tell him about the bullying and that they thought another student was responsible for creating the social networking site and posting the picture. Without the benefit of a school or district cyberbullying policy, Mr. Moten then attempts to figure out what to do to help James and stop the harassment.*

*Keywords: Bullying, Cyberbullying, Education, Educational Technology, Social Science*

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## ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Robert J. Mitchell Junior/Senior High School is a small institution located in central New York. The school sits in the center of a small, rural town and is home to grades seven through twelve. Throughout the six grade levels, the school has roughly 600 students. The district's elementary school is within walking distance of its high school. Separated by only a parking lot and a track, the elementary school is home to kindergarten through six grade classes and another 650 students.

The district and its two schools have a fairly wide range of socio-economic standings stemming from the various employment opportunities in the area. Some students have parents who work in a small nearby city, while others are a part of family farms. The two schools do not suffer from a lack of funds. The tax payers in the community are often very supportive of the school and the district was just approved a fifteen million dollar budget for the school year. The variety of backgrounds in the student's ages and economic standing helps to give the school a unique student body, despite its lack of ethnic diversity. Most students are Caucasian, with those

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belonging to an ethnic minority comprising approximately 5% of the student body. The ratio of boys to girls at Robert J. Mitchell is 56/44 percent, thereby creating a fairly even mix of genders.

## SETTING THE STAGE

Like most schools, Robert J. Mitchell has its share of behavior problems. However, in general, it is a safe and comfortable place for students to attend school. Recently, the school has seen a rise in incidents of bullying, specifically cyberbullying. The Cyberbullying Research Center (2011) defines this phenomena as the “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.” Cyberbullying can occur in a variety of ways, including “derogatory remarks, insults, threats or harmful rumors” (Arseneau, 2011). According to Labarge (2010), the seven most frequently used technologies by cyberbullies include social networking sites, SMS (Simple Message Service) or “texting,” email, blogs, software, dating and other member sites, and cellular phones. Statistics show that 43% of teens have been cyberbullied in the last year (National Crime Prevention Council, 2011). Such a high frequency of this injurious behavior is concerning because according to Shariff (2009), victims of cyberbullying, and even the bullies themselves, are more likely to suffer from mental health issues including depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Some individuals who are victims of cyberbullying have had suicidal thoughts and some have even committed suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Given the serious nature of the effects of cyberbullying on its victims, it comes as no surprise that cyberbullying has an enormous impact on students in schools. Hinduja and Patchin (2010) report that cyberbullying victims can feel too afraid to attend school, have problems with academics, and experience other forms of violence during and between classes. Beran and Li (2007) state that students who were bullied both in cyberspace and at school experienced difficulties such as low grades, poor concentration, and absenteeism. In 2006, Li found that in a survey of 264 junior high school students, males were more likely to be bullies and cyberbullies than females. Perhaps most alarming, cybervictims do not generally report their experiences to anyone, except potentially some trusted friends, so often adults and teachers do not know that it is occurring (Li, 2007; Slonje & Smith, 2008).

Because victims of cyberbullying do not speak for themselves, schools, organizations, and even state governments have begun to put programs and laws in place to protect them. According to Dooley (2011):

*“More than 35 states have anti-bullying laws specifically mandating school districts adopt anti-bullying policies. Fifteen states now have some type of cyberbullying law on the books, with another seven pending legislation before their state legislators. Missouri and California have passed the strongest laws protecting victims of cyberbullying while handing down the harshest punishment to the cyberbully. Each year more and more states are passing laws protecting children and adults alike from these types of attacks.”*

In 2010, New York State enacted the Dignity for All Students Act (NCLU, 2011) which protects all New York school children from bullying and harassment. Due to take effect in 2012, the law addresses all forms of persecution and aggravation, including cyberbullying. School districts such as South Hadley in Massachusetts and San Diego Unified in California have also begun to form anti-bullying task forces in order to combat not only bullying in general, but also cyberbullying in their schools (San Diego Unified School District, 2011; South Hadley School District, 2011). Finally, many organizations have created guidelines, information, and outreach

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