Superintendent Corner

How do you respond to a situation in which you have limited control? As a former school counselor, I would frequently reinforce with students and parents that we can have great influence over those things (words, actions, decisions) that we directly control; however, we must understand and find productive ways to respond to things that we do not control. Social media and school aggression are relatively new issues which school staff, students and parents are dealing. In most instances, social media activity among students is occurring outside of school; however, when social media communication includes name calling and threats, the face to face confrontation occurs on school grounds and impacts the school program significantly.

The Apple iPhone was first introduced in 2007. With it, a greatly expanded mobile phone market began to put mobile devices in the hands of young children and teenagers. As parents, we purchased these devices believing that it was a way to assure our children’s safety in case of emergency and because the devices had become a way for our children to access the vast knowledge available via the Internet. Let’s be clear, we parents provided the devices to our children. Even though social media via the home computer began to expand in the early 2000’s (Facebook, 2004; Twitter, 2006; Instagram, 2010), the expansion of the mobile device industry allowed users to be anywhere with a signal. The expansion of Wi-Fi facilitated social media use throughout our homes, schools, business and commercial establishments.

I want to be clear that my next sentence is not written to alarm or for dramatic purposes. Suicide rates among teenagers has increased since 2000. Some believe that there is a correlation between social media usage, cyberbullying and this alarming increase in suicide. It is important that we as a community come together to address this issue. Parents have a huge role; students have a huge role; the school has a huge role. On March 10 at 6:30 PM in the high school auditorium, our school counselors and social workers have organized a community forum on the topic of social media. The program will be facilitated by Jeremy Butler, Community Initiative Coordinator of iCan. I encourage community members concerned about this issue to attend.

What can parents do to help reduce your child’s chances of being involved in cyberbullying, sexting, invasion of privacy and other dangerous situations lurking on the Internet? I want to encourage parents to do three things today. First, start and frequently revisit conversation with your children about social media activity. Discuss how accessing inappropriate content, sharing personal information, participating in cyberbullying and making unsafe contacts are to be avoided; second, establish family rules about the use of computers and mobile devices. Identify a time when devices are to be turned off; consider requiring that mobile devices only be used in
common areas and are not allowed behind closed doors; third, develop and discuss a plan of how to respond when your child receives inappropriate messages. Talk with your child about the importance of being personally responsible for their words and actions; in addition, talk about expectations for respectful behavior.

We can only control those things that we can directly influence. At school, we are seeing an increase in aggressive behavior that is linked often to the previous evening’s social media messaging. Students are risking injury and suspension to confront comments rather than talking with parents and school staff. With over 700 children and less than 80 adults between the middle school and high school, there is a need for parents, students and school staff to work together closely to maintain school safety. Please plan on attending the March 10 forum; however, if you are a parent, please take the opportunity to start or continue this conversation with your children. If each child understands that they are responsible for their social media activity and know that this activity must be respectful, we will raise a community of young people who are positive digital citizens.

Paul Berry