

Students lacking cyber accountability

The recent arrest of four juveniles in a suburban Philadelphia school district for creating, storing and sharing pornographic and nude images of children, between the ages of 11 and 15, raises the question of responsible cyber use among students.

While some people might dismiss the incident as a "harmless prank" or an isolated case, what happened in the Tredyffrin-Easttown School District, in Chester County, is a crime, and similar incidents across the nation indicate that the misuse of cyber technology is growing. It also suggests that parents and teachers are doing a poor job of explaining the personal accountability that accompanies the privilege of using that technology. Tredyffrin-Easttown

is one of Pennsylvania's most affluent and high-achieving school districts. Students, in general, are intelligent and quite advanced in the use of technology, but there also those youngsters who misuse that knowledge. Having sent two sons to the district's schools, I am familiar with the high incidence of cyberbullying and sexting that flew under the radar for many years. This time the offenders were caught.

Not only did they violate the rights of their victims, but they made them vulnerable to child predators. According to Tredyffrin Township police, who began their investigation in April, the suspects took pornographic images from the Internet and distributed them around the school, telling students that the individuals in the images were their class-

mates. Some of the nude images of students that were gathered and distributed by the suspects were "selfies" taken in the victim's home, often with the location services setting on their phones activated, according to police. As a result, when the suspects shared the images, child predators would be able to find the location of the homes of the victims using metadata stored in the photos.

Nor is Tredyffrin-Easttown an isolated case.

Despite the existence of "acceptable use policies" by school districts nationwide to ensure appropriate student usage of the Internet and technology equipment, sexting in and out of school has increased. In 2009, the Pew Internet



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and American Life project reported that 15 percent of cellphone-owning students ages 12 to 17 had received sexually suggestive, nude or nearly nude images via text message.

Since 2009, police departments and school districts

in Boston, Baltimore, Fort Wayne, Indiana; Savannah, Georgia; and in Pennsylvania's Blue Mountains have been forced to deal with teen offenders who created and distributed nude images among classmates.

The courts have only complicated matters. Initially some states charged juveniles under child pornography laws, drawing criticism for being too harsh. Other state courts have been too lenient,

determining that students have a constitutional right to post provocative material on the Internet except in the most extraordinary cases. In Pennsylvania, a controversial 2012 law made it a summary offense for a minor to send an explicit photo of himself or herself and a misdemeanor if the image is of someone else. But the statute also requires a judge at sentencing to first consider a diversion program, followed by expunging the charge from the juvenile's record. These controversies suggest that the legal question of what rights students have to post provocative material on the Internet, and what rights schools have to restrict such postings, is still unsettled.

Parents and teachers need to do a better job of establishing cyber accountability among

teens by getting them to think before they post something online and make it available for the world to see. Ask them if they would want their parents to see or read what's online about them and how they want to be viewed by others. Students must be made aware that future employers check for information about prospective candidates online. When they post a provocative image or comment, it's there forever. And those posts can have a serious impact on future career.

The use of cyber technology is a privilege, not a right. Students must be made to understand that personal accountability accompanies that privilege.

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