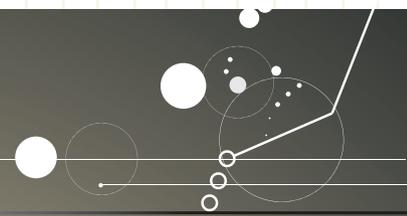




# cyber chat



## Protecting Teachers Online

By Dr. Barbara Spears

Having just attended the National Symposium: Strategic Action Against School Bullying on 17 March in conjunction with (i) the inaugural National Day of Action Against Bullying and Violence (18 March) and (ii) the launch of the revised National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF), my attention is naturally drawn, to schools and safety.

I hope that you have all had the opportunity to go to the *Bullying. No Way! Take a Stand* website ([www.takeastandtogether.gov.au/](http://www.takeastandtogether.gov.au/)) to create an avatar and record a message which takes a stand against bullying. Read the great messages that students, teachers and parents from across the country have put out there already!

The other thing to do is to download the Department of Broadband, Communications and Digital Economy (DBCDE) Cybersafety Help Button onto your personal and school computers, so that anyone in need of help, can link directly to the support services available to everyone. ([www.dbcde.gov.au/online\\_safety\\_and\\_security/cybersafetyhelpbutton\\_download](http://www.dbcde.gov.au/online_safety_and_security/cybersafetyhelpbutton_download))

The release of the revised NSSF is the culmination of national consultation and builds on the previous document, by recognising the importance that technology has grown to play in young people's lives particularly in and around school settings, since the first NSSF was released in 2003. It provides six guiding principles, the first of which states that: "Australian schools affirm the rights of all members of the school community to feel safe and be safe at school."

This, of course, means that teachers have the right to feel safe and be safe while going about their daily work, both online and offline. Teachers, however, also have a responsibility to reflect on how they operate in the online environment, and need to consider not only the professional, but

also the legal and ethical challenges and consequences of everything they do in this domain.

In South Australia, the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), Catholic Education of SA and the Association of Independent Schools of SA, have together endorsed the Protective Practices for Staff document, ([www.decs.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ProtectivePracticesforSta.pdf](http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/ProtectivePracticesforSta.pdf)) which "provides clear advice to all adult members of pre-school, school and out-of-school hours care communities, in terms of the establishment of positive, caring and respectful relationships with children and young people". In particular, the professional boundaries between students and teachers are highlighted in terms of safe and appropriate social networking practices. Teachers are challenged to consider their digital footprint and what information about them, or images of them, could be accessed by others; to reflect on whether these represent how they wish to be seen by the school community; and to consider how these may be used inappropriately by others. In Queensland, a revised code of conduct for teachers has outlined that they are banned from contacting students via social networking sites (SNS), and should protect their privacy by restricting access to people who are not students, if they use SNS in their private time ([www.news.com.au/technology/teachers-banned-from-contacting-students-on-social-networking-sites/story-e6frfro0-1225790728978](http://www.news.com.au/technology/teachers-banned-from-contacting-students-on-social-networking-sites/story-e6frfro0-1225790728978))

A paper by Russo, Squelch and Varnham (2010), *Teachers and Social Networking: Think Before You Post* outlines a legal perspective on this issue, comparing the USA with Australia and New Zealand, around such notions as public versus private spaces and the role that 'free speech' may play. They also make some useful

recommendations for consideration which include, among other things, the need to update policies so they are reflective of any changes in the law.

Finally, the case of substitute teacher, Julie Amero from Connecticut, USA, is worthy of consideration, especially in terms of the safety provided for temporary relief teachers in this country as they go about their teaching duties in our schools. Amero was taking a class when the computer began showing pornographic images. She was accused of deliberately accessing the site, but it was eventually found to be infected with spyware, and it was beyond her control. However, between 2004 and 2008, she was involved in a court battle to prove her innocence, with the end result being that she forfeited her teaching credentials and paid a fine for one charge of disorderly conduct. Nancy Willard's reflection on the case ([new.csiu.org/onlinedocs/AmeroTragedy.pdf](http://new.csiu.org/onlinedocs/AmeroTragedy.pdf)) provides legal and educational commentary which highlights the following questions: what professional development do we give to these members of our school communities regarding internet practices? Are we ensuring that we have the technical security, education and appropriate follow-through or investigation required to determine if access to inappropriate sites was accidental or intentional?

I will continue to explore some of these issues in the next column. 

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