WBEZ91.5
CHICAGO WBEZ NEWS EDITION

DONATE



EDUCATION

Cyberbullying Law Shields Teachers From Student Tormentors

February 19, 2013 · 3:04 AM ET

Heard on Morning Edition

LISA WORF

FROM  WFAE 90.7**4-Minute Listen**[PLAYLIST](#) [Download](#)
[Transcript](#)

Ganging up on classmates online can get students suspended.

But sometimes teachers are the target of cyberbullying, and in North Carolina, educators have said enough is enough. State officials have now made it a crime to "intimidate or torment" teachers online.

Chip Douglas knew something was up with his 10th-grade English class. When he was teaching, sometimes he'd get a strange question and the kids would laugh. It started to make sense when he learned a student had created a fake Twitter account using his name.

"It was awful," he says. "It had this image of me as this drug addict, violent person, supersexual, that I wouldn't want to portray."

Douglas told the kids he planned to call the police — because under the new North Carolina law, the student behind the tweets could spend a month in jail and pay a \$1,000 fine.

"It's the first statute that exposes 15-, 16-, 17-year-olds to potential criminal sanctions for a dumb mistake they make, something stupid they say," says Chris Brook of the ACLU of North Carolina, who adds that the law is too broad.

The law prohibits students from creating fake online profiles for teachers. But it makes it a crime to post real images or make any statement online, even if it's true, that provokes harassment.

"That is a terrible message to send to students ... that accurate critiques of governmental employees could land you in criminal hot water," Brook says. "And no one should be comfortable with that."

Legal experts say North Carolina's effort is just another twist to a series of state laws that criminalize speech.

"There has been a lot of this stuff suggested in legislatures and sometimes adopted, or sometimes prosecutors have interpreted existing laws so broadly," says Eugene Volokh, a UCLA professor who specializes in First Amendment and cyberspace law. "It's something of a trend, but once those laws are challenged, they'll be struck down."

Until then, people like Kenny Lynch will have to use their own discretion. He's a detective with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools whom the district hired specifically to deal with Internet issues.

"I look at the law and try to use a bit of common sense," he says.

Usually what that entails is giving a kid a stern talking to, often coupled with suspension. Lynch can think of only one time when the law would have come in handy — five years ago when two kids went after a high school teacher.

"Posted pictures of this particular teacher, insinuated that he was a pedophile, a sexual predator, that he had a criminal background of this type of stuff, all of which wasn't true," Lynch says.

At East Mecklenburg High School, ninth-grader Kayla Jackson walks by with a bright pink phone in hand and ear buds to match. She knows how students can make it

difficult for teachers. In middle school, a kid targeted one of her favorites online. She and a friend were mad at the boy, but they say what he did wasn't a crime.

"Yeah, you can't arrest everyone for saying something stupid. Because if that was the case, everybody I know would be in jail," she says.

But it is serious to Chip Douglas, the teacher whose student tweeted offensive things using his name. The student confessed, and Douglas thought about pressing charges but decided not to.

"He excels in classes," Douglas says. "He could do incredible things if he didn't have a black mark on his record. It's really not what I want to do to a student."

Douglas resigned after the Twitter incident. He was already thinking of leaving his job and says all those tweets made his decision easier.

Support WFAE

Stories like these are made possible by contributions from readers and listeners like you.

[DONATE NOW](#)

[VISIT THE STATION](#)

More Stories From NPR

SELF-CONTROL FOR MONSTERS



EDUCATION

WATCH: It's Hard To Delay Gratification. Just Ask Cookie Monster



EDUCATION

Lawmakers Call For Investigation After NPR Report On Troubled Student Loan Program

Popular on NPR.org



HEALTH

Hair Dyes And Straighteners Linked To Higher Cancer Risk, Especially For Black Women



SCIENCE

A 'Mole' Isn't Digging Mars: NASA Engineers Are Trying To Find Out Why



ECONOMY

'The Best Thing You Can Do Is Not Buy More Stuff,' Says 'Secondhand' Expert



NATIONAL

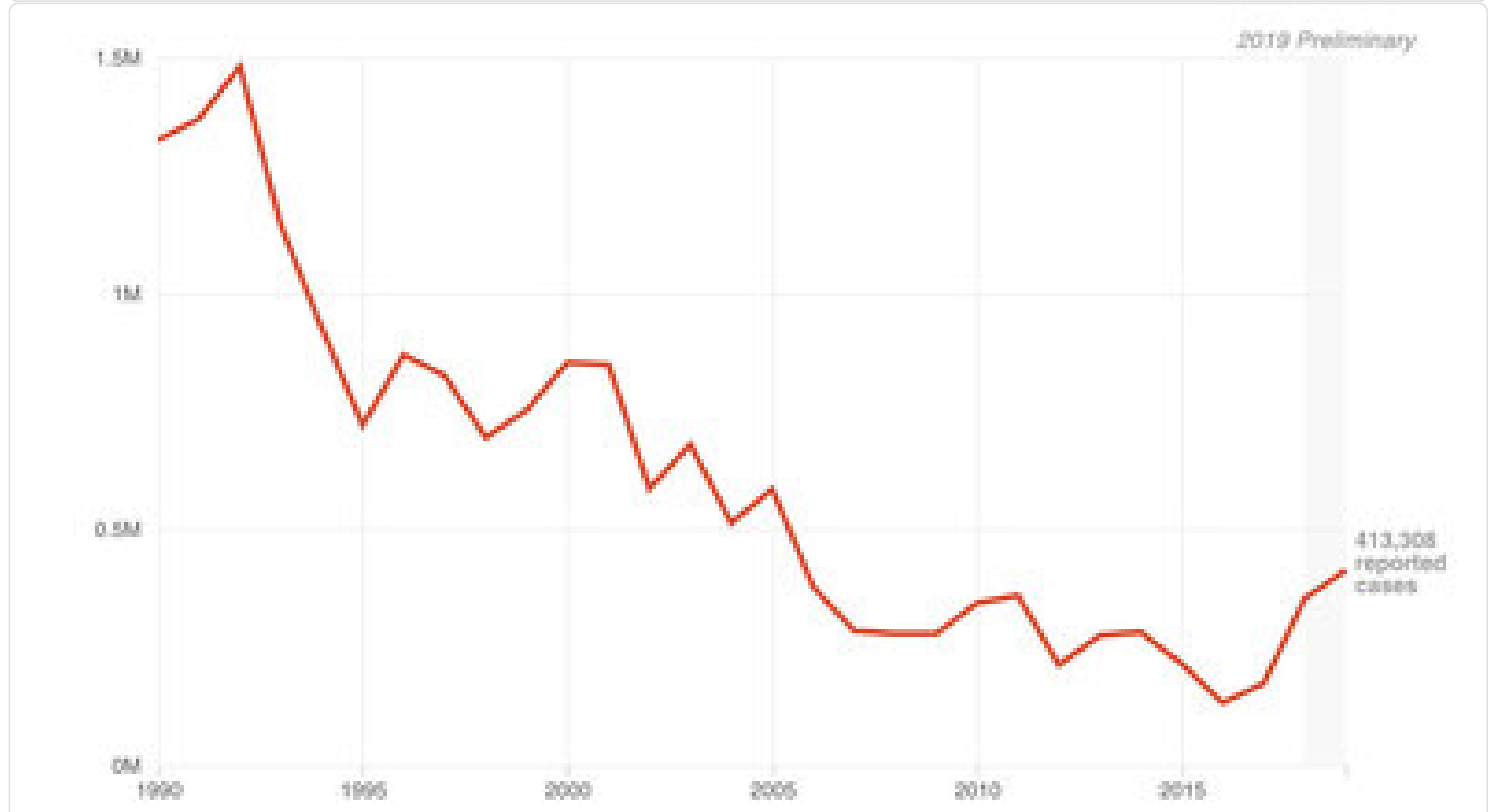
Sailor Kills 2, Wounds 1 Before Taking Own Life At Hawaii's Pearl Harbor Base

NPR Editors' Picks



EUROPE

'Britain's Most Famous Christmas Tree' Criticized For Looking Sparse, Droopy And Sad



GLOBAL HEALTH

Measles Numbers Were Bad In 2018. This Year, They're Even Worse



MUSIC NEWS

R. Kelly Girlfriend Says She Was Hacked, Did Not Make Claims Against Him



ASIA

Woman Heading To Testify At Rape Trial Set On Fire In India

READ & LISTEN

CONNECT

Home

News

Arts & Life

Music

Podcasts

Programs

ABOUT NPR

Overview

Finances

People

Press

Public Editor

Corrections

Newsletters

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

Contact

Help

GET INVOLVED

Support Public Radio

Sponsor NPR

NPR Careers

NPR Shop

NPR Events

Visit NPR

[terms of use](#)

[privacy](#)

[your privacy choices](#)

[text only](#)

© 2019 npr