**U.S. House Education Subcommittee to Examine Cyber Safety for Students**
**U.S. House of Representatives Education and Labor Committee**
**The Honorable Carolyn McCarthy, Chair**

**Hearing on "Ensuring Student Cyber Safety"**

**June 24, 2010, 10:00 am**

**Testimony by Dr. Phillip C. McGraw, Ph.D.**

Good morning.

Madam Chairwoman McCarthy, members of the Committee I am honored to speak to you about Cyber-bullying which I pray will be added to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

The "times they are a changing". As a boy growing up in Texas and Oklahoma, our fantasies were inspired by tales of the Wild Wild West. It was indeed a wild era when  there literally was "no law west of the Pecos" – when gunslingers like Black Bart and Billy the Kid freely roamed the countryside, terrorizing law abiding citizens.  They were unchecked and unaccountable, the bullies of a time gone by.

My personal heroes were not the villains, but the marshals!  The guys in the white hats—men like Matt Dillon and Pat Garrison who did what they could to stop the outlaws' random, brutal attacks on innocent victims.

Today, we have a new frontier--a new "Wild Wild West". It's called the "Wild Wild Web", and it can be a very dangerous place, especially for our children. The gunslingers of the Wild Wild Web are what are called cyber-bullies or Keyboard Bullies--omnipresent, electronic stalkers who can and do go after their targets day and night, destroying their reputations if not their lives, and then logging off their computers and riding away.

In the past a bully had physical size and words. Now the cyber-bully has Facebook, MySpace, Email, Texting, Web Postings, Blocked calling via the Internet, Instant Messaging, and chat rooms. Each has so much power and affect so many that they represent the Weapons of Mass Destruction of human communication for students! When students are sitting in class most of them at the junior high or middle school level will have cell phones with text capability. While a teacher may be lecturing about English literature or supervising a test, several students in the

class will be texting each other and their friends. There will be cyber-bullies at work during this time causing clear and unknown danger to those very students in class. It is an epidemic in which it is easy to be a bully because a bully remains anonymous.

Like the old west, the Wild Wild Web is completely unbridled – with no checks, no balances, no accountability and no liability. There are seldom if ever, consequences for cyber-bullies' actions and little punishment even if they are identified – which is not an easy task. We need a new group of marshals, men and women in white hats, to once again keep our kids safe.

Let me try to capture the scope of this crisis. When I grew up--when most of you on the panel grew up-- there were few if any home computers, few if any cell phones, certainly no texting, no Facebook or MySpace. Bullying was limited to school playgrounds and lunch rooms. Insults were scrawled on a bathroom wall.

But in 2010, the havoc caused by cyber-bullies is exponentially greater than whatever used to happen on a playground or was written on a bathroom wall. Today, through the cloak of anonymity, a cyber-bully can hack into a student's Facebook page, access their Twitter account, alter their My Space page or steal their email accounts. A cyber-bully can post changes to a Facebook page, making it appear the owner of the Facebook page has a sexually transmitted disease. A cyber-bully can create fake photos of an unsuspecting teenager in what appears to be a very sexually humiliating situation. A cyber-bully can invent shockingly embarrassing emails from one child and have them sent to someone else. By using dozens of false identities on social networking sites, a cyber-bully also can make his victim feel that legions of other kids despise him or her as well.

In a matter of seconds, a cyber-bully can completely destroy a fragile adolescent's reputation. While a bully's rumors in the 1980s might have reached twenty people, a cyber-bully's rumors will reach millions. While whatever was written on that wall in the old days could be erased, the Internet and all of its social networking sites can not. It is impossible to un-ring the "cyber-bell." Drs. Patchin and Hinduja found that all forms of bullying lead to increases in suicidal thoughts and victims of cyber-bullying were 1.9 times more likely to actually attempt suicide than non victims.

Members of the committee, we are facing a serious crisis. According to one study I've read, 42% of kids say they have been bullied while online. 35% say they have been threatened online. The National Crime Prevention Council reports that at least once per week, 52% of all

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students read some sort of cyber-bullying message directed at someone else. Much of the abuse is directed at racial and ethnic minorities, gays, Hispanics – and girls are more often the target than boys.

And what makes it worse for these victims is that there is absolutely no place for them to hide. Think about it. In the old days, kids got away from their bullies by retreating to the safety of their own homes. If the bullies followed them, you as parents would walk out the front door, take down their names, chase them away, and call their own parents. Not anymore. Today's child can be sitting in his own house, doing homework in his bedroom, reading, relaxing, or watching television – just being a kid. Suddenly, and relentlessly, he or she starts getting emails that say, "You're ugly." "No one likes you." "We are going to beat you up tomorrow."  "We all wish you would just die." "No one wants you here, so why don't you just kill yourself?"  Even while in the company of their parents, sitting with them in the den, the children can be attacked via their cell phone with text messages.  Cyber-bullies will strike at anytime, and they will follow their targets everywhere—not only into their homes, but from school to school, even across the country. In almost every case of abuse, no matter what kind of abuse it is, isolation is the abuser's #1 tool. The abuser does everything possible to make a victim feel there is nothing that he or she can do to escape. When it comes to cyber-abuse, there is especially no escape.

I have addressed this issue on the "Dr. Phil" show because I have seen the torment it causes. Some victims suffer in silence and some experience symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Some decompensate and actually lose touch with reality. Their grades drop because they are afraid to go to school.

Their friends disappear. Because of the shame and embarrassment they feel from the cyber-bullying, they often won't say anything to a parent or any other authority figure. They become even more humiliated—and yes, more isolated—as the cyber-bullying continues for weeks, months and even years.  Eventually, some of these children become so distraught that they do the unthinkable. According to the Cyber-bullying Research Center, cyber-bullying victims are almost **twice as likely** to attempt suicide compared to those who have not endured such bullying. You probably know about 15- year-old Phoebe Prince, the Massachusetts teenager who, after being harassed, mistreated and then cyber-bullied for three months by a group of other girls, hanged herself in a bedroom closet. 17-year-old Long Island teen Alexis Pilkington, the soccer star and daughter of a New York City police officer also took her own life following

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vicious taunts on social networking sites. 13-year-old Megan Meier committed suicide after receiving hateful messages from what she thought was a boyfriend—but who reportedly turned out to be the vengeful mother of a classmate.

But there are just as many stories we are asked to help with at the "Dr. Phil" show that never make the front pages --- like the 11-year-old boy in Massachusetts who hanged himself after a group of kinds ganged up on him, using the Internet to spread false rumors that he was gay. Or the 13-year-old girl in Florida who took her own life after learning, to her horror, that kids at her school were posting a revealing photo of her on social networking sites.

Just as shocking are the studies that show how little is done about what is happening. It is estimated that 85 percent of bullying today goes on unabated. Because cyber-abuse almost always happens off campus, teachers and school administrators say they have no power to intervene. Because no "official crime" has been committed, the police say there is nothing they can do. And, sadly, parents are almost never aware of what is happening.

Times have changed the challenges we face -- and we as a society have to change with them. We must change our sensitivities, our policies and our training protocols so we do not let the victims of today's "keyboard bullies" fall through the cracks. That is why I am here today to suggest you add language to address cyber-bullying to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. A cyber bully in 2010 has the weapons to cause pain and suffering to victims that no other generation has had to cope with. Cyber-bullies need to be blocked. It is time to lay the foundation to protect our children during those critical hours when we are not there to personally supervise their lives and interactions. This Committee has an opportunity to enact legislation to add language to ESEA on cyber-bullying. By doing so you, will make meaningful changes in the lives of millions of children and adolescents who instead of suffering in silence may someday become our future leaders.

On the "Dr. Phil" show, we have taken the lead in dealing with cyber-bullying through intervention, education and prevention. These three principles must be kept in mind if we truly desire a meaningful outcome to stop the emotional carnage created by this ubiquitous problem. It is important for school officials to think comprehensively about how to address cyber safety and early prevention, how to address incidents that occur, and how to handle ongoing chronic situations. We can address the problem through our website with resources for parents and students dealing with cyber-bullying.

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I am glad the subcommittee is holding today's hearing because I believe it begins a long-overdue conversation about what cyber-bullying is doing to us. I have been saying, over and over, that we have got to start talking openly about this issue. The worst thing parents can do is to shrug and stay out of their kids' on-line life, thinking that some texting or social network posting can't really be all that serious. They need to ask their children directly if they have ever been ridiculed, intimidated or humiliated on the Internet. They need to let their children know that they do not have to feel isolated and alone because of any cyber-bullying that they have to endure. They need to assure their children that they will do everything they can to protect them and to fight for them.

They also must get very involved in their children's high-tech lives. The fact is that most parents today are fractionally computer literate. They don't know what's coming across their kids' computers or phones. Even those who try to limit or supervise their children's time on line do not understand that video games now have Internet capability.

If the adults in a child's life are not aware of cyber-bullying, the bullying will not go away. Which is why I believe that all parents who are not familiar with the Internet need to get familiar with the Internet immediately. Their own children may be their best resources. Here is just a sampling of what parents can do:

- Have their children take them to the sites they frequently visit and to show them what they do on those sites.
- Have their children show them what they have in their profiles on social networking sites to make sure it is accurate and appropriate.
- Scrutinize their children's' "friends lists" on their various accounts and make sure they recognize the identity of each "friend."
- Make certain their children have never and will never share their passwords with anyone, even a friend, to avoid the risk of someone impersonating them.
- Encourage school-aged children to change their password regularly.
- Teach school-aged children to encrypt access to their phone and computer.
- Have a very pointed conversation with them about "sexting," the risky practice of sending sexually explicit photos and/or messages which can easily be forwarded without their knowledge. Doing so may actually be defined as child pornography.

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- And establish a family policy for acceptable computer use.

- List what may or may not be allowed to be done on a computer.

- Include clear rules about time limits.

- Keep the children's computer out of their bedroom and put it in a very public area such as a kitchen or the family room.

At the same time, parents need to make sure that their own children aren't tempted to cross the line and become, even ever so briefly, Internet bullies themselves, secretly getting back at someone they believe has crossed them. As we must all remember, when it comes to children, just one single malicious Internet rumor can result in unimaginably deep emotional scars that may last a lifetime. I understand the plight of many families in America and realize that a parent may have very little time with a child or may not even be involved at all. We must be creative in our intervention in order to associate with community leaders who have influence and access to our children.

Finally, we need to give school officials the tools they need to deal with cyber-bullying comprehensively, to address early prevention, early intervention when incidents arise, and chronic situations. Some examples of this comprehensive approach might be school officials and leaders in the community coordinating Public Service Announcements, Special School Programs, banners placed where students congregate, constant website postings prohibiting cyber-bullying, links from various websites and the thousands of additional resources we can bring to stop cyber-bulling. It is time for the "Keyboard Bullies" to know There is a New Sheriff in Town.

Members of the committee, I thank you for the work you are doing. I've devoted countless hours of my show to cyber-bullying because I know it's one of the most destructive forces out there, not only for children, but for families as well. It is our responsibility as educators, lawmakers, concerned citizens and as parents to stand up against this growing, insidious threat. The lightning speed at which technology is advancing demands our response.

Congresswoman McCarthy, Members of the committee, I thank you for the honor of addressing you this morning. It has been a privilege.

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