

The Curriculum

*In the race to get kids to the finish line,
let's not bypass their developmental needs.*

Thomas Armstrong

A superhighway is being built across today's education landscape. It has been under construction for some time. Initially, this project focused on connecting kindergarten to the elementary grades. Gradually, it has broadened its vision until now it extends from preschool to graduate school.¹ All the byways, narrow routes, and winding paths that have traditionally filled the journey from early childhood to early adulthood are now being "aligned" so that the curriculum (a Latin word meaning "a lap around a racetrack") can move along at breakneck speed.

So far, this project has received the approbation of most educators and policymakers. Such a colossal undertaking, however, extracts a great cost.

An Environmental Impact Report

Educators today are almost entirely engaged in *academic achievement discourse* (Armstrong, 2006). The topics of this discourse—test scores, benchmarks, data, accountability, and adequate yearly progress—are the bulldozers, backhoes, cement mixers, and asphalt pavers that are constructing the curriculum superhighway. A more appropriate focus of educators' dialogue would be *human development discourse*, which recognizes that human beings travel through different stages of life, each with its own requirements for optimal growth.

The curriculum superhighway is carving an asphalt swath through several distinct areas of the human development countryside, threatening to damage or destroy their delicate ecosystems. Let's consider some of the eco-disasters likely to ensue from this multi-billion-dollar road project.

Human beings travel through different stages of life, each with its own requirements for optimal growth.

Early Childhood

In early childhood, the developmental bottom line is *play*. When I say play, I'm not talking about playing checkers or soccer; I'm referring to open-ended play in a rich, multimodal environment, with supportive facilitators and a minimum of adult interference. Between the ages of 2 and 6, children's brains go through an incredible process of development. Metabolism is twice that of an adult, and brain connections are formed or

discarded in response to the kinds of stimulation the child does or doesn't receive.

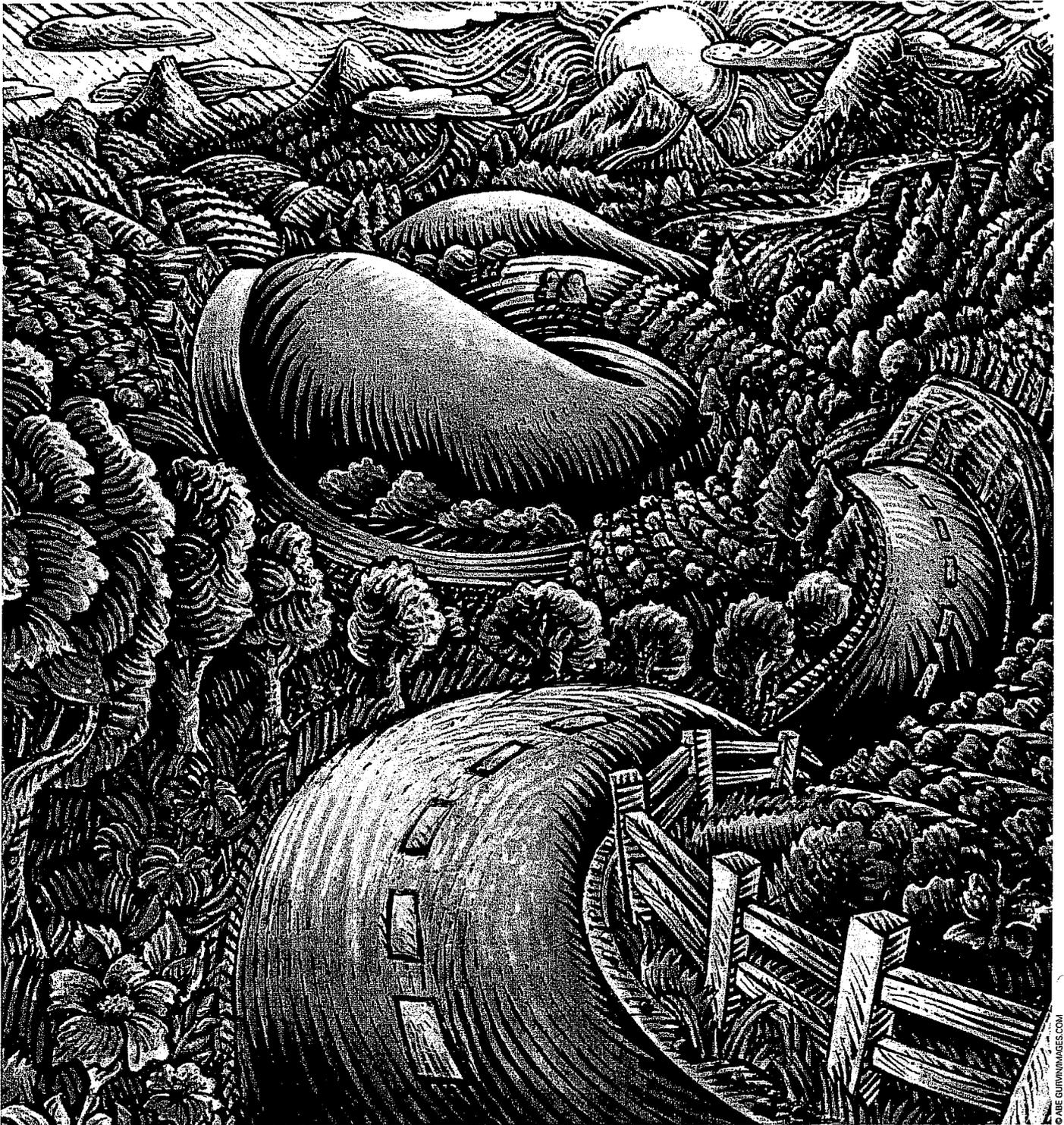
At this time of life, it makes the most sense to encourage open-ended engagement with the world in an environment like that of Habibi's Hutch, a preschool in Austin, Texas, that calls itself a "natural childlife preserve." Children spend most of their day playing on swing sets, in sand piles, in playhouses, and with art materials and toys. They perform their own plays and participate in a cooking class (Osborne, 2007). The preschool's Web site (<http://habibishutch.com/philosophy.html>) explains, "Our kids leave the Hutch with so much more than their ABCs and 123s. They all leave with a sense of themselves and a wonder and drive to know more about themselves and their surroundings."

This approach to early childhood education is a good example of a developmentally appropriate program. Unfortunately, the curriculum superhighway is delivering academic goods and materials as well as formal teaching lessons from the higher grades down to the preschool level—a trend that could ultimately destroy this precious ecology.

Middle Childhood

In middle childhood, the developmental bottom line is *learning how the world works*. Naturally, children of all ages are constantly learning about the world. But

Superhighway



from age 7 to 10, this need becomes especially important. Kids are becoming a more significant part of the broader society, and they want to understand the rules of this more complex world. Their brains have matured to the point where they can begin to learn the formal rules of reading, writing, and math; but they also need to satisfy their insatiable curiosity by learning how governments work, how butterflies grow, how their community developed, and countless other things.

The “children’s museum” model of

ecosystem could eventually decay and disappear.

Early Adolescence

The developmental needs of early adolescence consist primarily of *social, emotional, and metacognitive growth*. Surges of testosterone at puberty swell the amygdala, especially in boys, generating strong emotions (Giedd et al., 1996). For girls, estrogen levels appear to affect serotonin levels, leading to high rates of depression (Born, Shea, & Steiner, 2002). The curriculum needs to

to regard this newly acquired meta-cognitive capacity as merely an opportunity to teach algebra and reading comprehension. The components of the superhighway’s infrastructure—tougher requirements, more homework, and harder tests—leave teachers little chance to engage students’ emotions, social needs, and metacognitive thinking in any substantial way. The resulting deterioration in this ecosystem may lead to environmental hazards such as gangs, violence, and mental disorders.

“In all the world there is no other child exactly like you. In the millions of years that have passed, there has never been another child exactly like you. You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything. Yes, you are a marvel.”

— Pablo Casals

learning, recommended by Howard Gardner (1994) among others, is a good example of how we can preserve this developmental ecology. “In a children’s museum,” Gardner explains, “kids have an opportunity to work with very interesting kinds of things, at their own pace, in their own way, using the kinds of intelligence which they’re strong in.” In a unit developed by the Minnesota Children’s Museum, for example, 1st grade students spend six weeks studying insects using the museum’s Insect Discovery Kit and then take a trip to the museum’s anthill exhibit (Association of Children’s Museums, 2003).

Because schools today are spending more and more class time preparing students for academic tests that are part of the superhighway scheme (a project aptly called “No Child Left Behind”), students have fewer opportunities to engage in a rich exploration of our incredible world. As a result, this

reflect young adolescents’ greater sensitivity to emotional and social issues. For example, at Benjamin Franklin Middle School in Ridgewood, New Jersey, students read about the Warsaw ghetto and then discuss how they can combat injustices that they see in their own lives (Curtis, 2001).

Just before puberty, children’s brains experience a surge in the growth of gray matter in the frontal, parietal, and temporal lobes, which may be related to what Piaget called *formal operational thinking*—the ability to “think about thinking.” This new capacity represents an incredible resource, enabling young teens to begin to reflect at a more abstract level—not only to gain perspective on their own emotional responses, but also to engage intellectually with such universal issues as justice and individual rights.

Unfortunately, the project managers of the curriculum superhighway appear

Late Adolescence

In late adolescence, the developmental bottom line is *preparing to live independently in the real world*. At this age, neural pathways in the brain are becoming increasingly sheathed, or myelinated, so that nerve impulses travel more quickly—especially in the frontal lobes, which control planning and decision making (National Institute of Mental Health, 2001). At this age, young people in many states are legally empowered to set up their own individual retirement accounts, drive a car, marry, vote, and engage in other adult responsibilities. But in a typical high school classroom, these same adolescents have to raise their hand for permission to go to the bathroom.

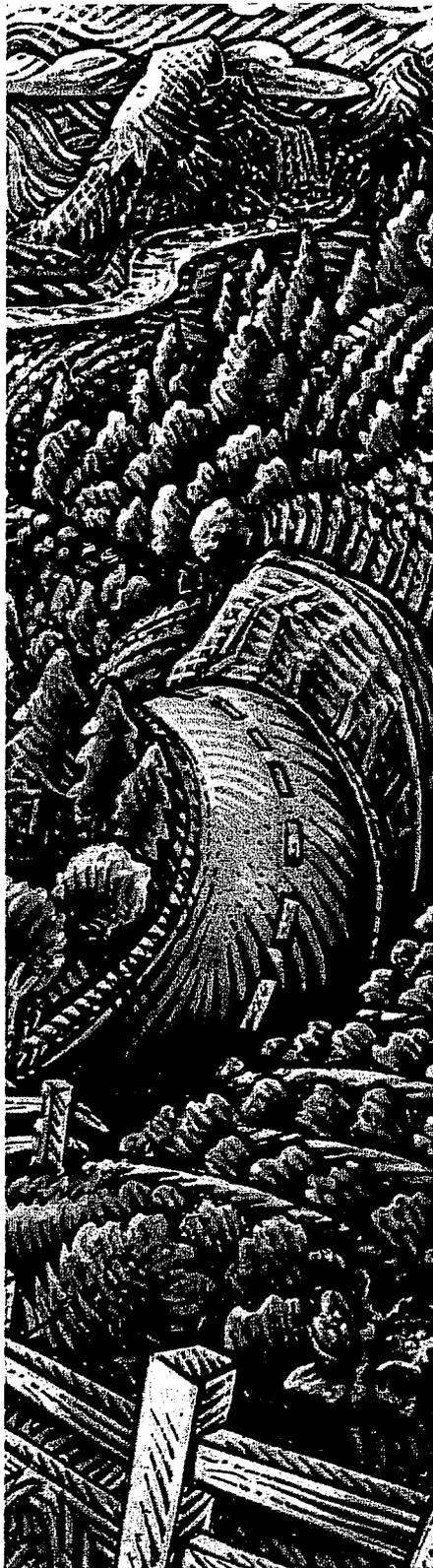
At this stage of life, kids need less classroom time and more time out in the real world, in apprenticeships, internships, job shadowing, career-based work experiences, and other situ-

ations in which they can experience themselves as incipient adults. The traffic on the curriculum superhighway, however, is especially intense at this point. High school students are deluged with pressures to pass high-stakes tests, meet strict graduation requirements, and take advanced courses that will prepare them for four-year academic colleges. Many of them aren't even allowed to dip their toes into the currents of the real world, because to take this time would mean falling behind their peers in an increasingly competitive society. The curriculum superhighway's attack on this ecosystem may erode students' ability to think for themselves, reflect on their futures, and make responsible choices that mirror their own proclivities and interests.

Restoring a Human Development Curriculum

Schools need to approach curriculum in a way that is environmentally sensitive to the ecologies of different developmental stages of life. Let's start with literacy. In early childhood, literacy needs to take place in the context of play. According to developmental psychologist David Elkind (2001), children aren't even cognitively ready to learn formal reading and math skills until they reach Piaget's operational stage of cognitive development around age 6 or 7. In early childhood, literacy should be just another part of the child's rich multisensory environment. A playhouse area, for example, should include books and magazines along with dolls and furniture. If a child wants to play at being mommy reading a story to baby, that's up to her (experts call this process *emergent literacy*).

At the elementary school level, we can appropriately teach formal reading and writing skills, because the symbol systems of literacy are an important



component of how the world works. Literacy will develop best, however, not with boring worksheets and sterile reading programs, but with reading and writing experiences that give students a chance to learn about all aspects of the world, from science to history to social relationships. In such programs, students may read historical narratives, guidebooks on science topics, and other reading materials (such as reference sources, Internet text, or high-quality fiction) that whet their curiosity to find out more about the world. Likewise, they may take field notes on nature hikes, write letters to people of influence, and create reports based on what they've discovered about their community's history.

In middle school, literacy needs to take place in the context of a young teen's social, emotional, and metacognitive growth. Journal writing, therefore, is developmentally more important than book report writing. Reading material should include emotional themes that speak to the adolescent's inner turmoil. Teachers should assign collaborative and cooperative reading and writing assignments to honor the social needs of early adolescence. They need to teach students how to use metacognitive strategies to monitor their own reading and writing habits.

Finally, in high school, literacy needs to serve the interests of the student becoming an independent person in the real world. Here, college preparation reading lists are appropriate for some students. But all students should learn more practical literacy skills, including how to write a résumé, how to skim for essential information on the Internet, and how to develop a lifelong interest in reading as a hobby.

Math and science instruction should also evolve as children move through each developmental ecosystem. In early

childhood, math and science are an integral part of daily play activities as kids build with blocks, examine insects, and dangle from the jungle gym. In elementary school, kids are developmentally ready to learn the formal systems of mathematics and the use of science to answer questions about the world, from why the sky is blue to how a car works.

In middle school, math and science become vehicles for exploring the biology of life, the ultimate nature of the cosmos, the consequences of a nuclear war, and other emotionally laden and thought-provoking topics. Students need to work on high-interest, group-oriented math and science projects (for example, preserving a bird habitat or monitoring junk food habits) and communicate their findings to others through the Internet, science fairs, and other means.

At the high school level, students need to study for preparatory exams in math and science to help them apply for college or technical schools. They also need to learn the practical math and technical skills necessary for living independently (for example, financial planning and using computer software) and develop the science and math literacy necessary to vote intelligently on such issues as taxation, global warming, and the costs of war.

A human development curriculum also extends beyond literacy, math, and science to other subjects, including the arts, physical education, social skills training, and imaginative, moral, and spiritual development. In far too many schools, these subjects have been crushed beneath the heavy weight of the concrete (benchmarks), asphalt (standardized tests), and steel (adequate yearly progress) that make up the bulk of the curriculum superhighway.

As educators, we need to rescue these

important components of person-building from the rubble of the superhighway construction site and preserve the delicate ecologies that make up our students' stages of human growth and development. By dismantling the curriculum superhighway, we can ensure that our students will not stress out in traffic jams, keel over from road fatigue, or be maimed or killed in collisions along the way. By focusing on the whole child, we can prepare our students to meet the challenges of the real world in the years to come. ■

Schools need to approach curriculum in a way that is environmentally sensitive to the ecologies of different developmental stages of life.

¹See, for example, the 2004 publication of the California Alliance of PreK-18 Partnerships, *Raising Student Achievement Through Effective Education Partnerships: Policy and Practice* (available at www.ced.csulb.edu/California-alliance/documents/Alliance-Report-printversion.pdf).

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A Novel Idea Crafted on a Cellphone

By Katie Ash

If students in the United States embrace the literary phenomenon now sweeping Japan, the next great American novel could be written on a cellphone.

In Japan, five of the top 10 best-selling novels of 2007 were originally written as cellphone novels, according to an annual list published by Tohan, a major Japanese book-selling company. Writers create such works by typing out snippets of their stories on their cellphones in text messages and sending them to a Web site, where readers can follow, and react to, the works-in-progress. Text messaging requires the writer to limit each sent message to about 160 characters. The writers tend to be young, digitally savvy students.

It's a movement that educators say has the potential to make writing more accessible and engaging for American students, too.

"Literature is one place where [cellphones] are already having an impact, whether we like it or not, as far as making the process of writing more

Debate Over Quality

Paul Levinson, a science fiction writer and a communications and media studies professor at Fordham University in New York City, agrees with Smith.

"I think [cellphone novels] will be 100 percent enormously popular here in the United States," he says. "The idea that novels have to come in books, and that people have to read a large amount at once, is an old-fashioned concept."

But some critics liken the cellphone-novel format to comic books, and they worry that the conversational style in which they are normally written could have potentially damaging effects on students' writing skills.

"The quality of the writing in a lot of Japanese cellphone novels is pretty low," says Ben Dooley, a translator of Japanese and a contributing writer to *The Millions*, a blog about books, reading, and the book industry. "It's generally better than [instant-messaging] chats, but not by much."

in that the writing is first published in epistolary form. Releasing a novel in such a way, says Yancey, allows students to share their work in draft form with a wide audience, compile the responses, and adjust the work accordingly.

New Avenues of Expression

Kylene Beers, the president-elect of the NCTE suggests the educational potential of cellphone novels lies in the increased level of engagement they encourage.

"Setting aside [the question of] is it a good book or a bad book, [teachers should] think about the level of engagement and the sophisticated thinking you have to do to parse [the story] down to that language," says Beers, who is the senior reading adviser for the Reading and Writing Project at Teachers College, Columbia University.

For students, part of the attraction of cellphone novels is the social and collaborative nature of the medium, Beers suggests.

"I think [cellphone novels] will be 100 percent enormously popular here in the United States."
—Paul Levinson, Professor, Fordham University, New York City

accessible," says Rachel S. Smith, the vice president of services for the New Media Consortium, an Austin, Texas-based group of almost 250 educational organizations focused on the exploration of new technologies.

Although some educators have harnessed cellphones for educational purposes—capitalizing on their Internet access and GPS capabilities—so far, the use of cellphones to encourage writing in classrooms has been introduced more in theory than in practice.

But the sheer number of students who have cellphones makes them a valuable educational tool, says Smith. "Even students who ... don't have a computer often have a cellphone. [Students] carry [cellphones] all the time," she says. "They don't go anywhere without [them], so you're reaching them where they are."

That accessibility and immediacy may entice students who would not normally sit down with the intention of writing a novel to start writing, she says.

Typically, cellphone novels depend heavily on plot movement, while skimming on character development, prose, and description, says Dooley. "They have a very minimalist, fill-in-the-blank style of writing and tend to present readers with pretty flat characters."

But, he says, "Raymond Carver is often called a minimalist, and no one would deny he's an important writer."

Kathleen Yancey, the president of the National Council of Teachers of English, or NCTE, based in Urbana, Ill., and an English professor at Florida State University, in Tallahassee, argues that cellphone novels hone important writing skills.

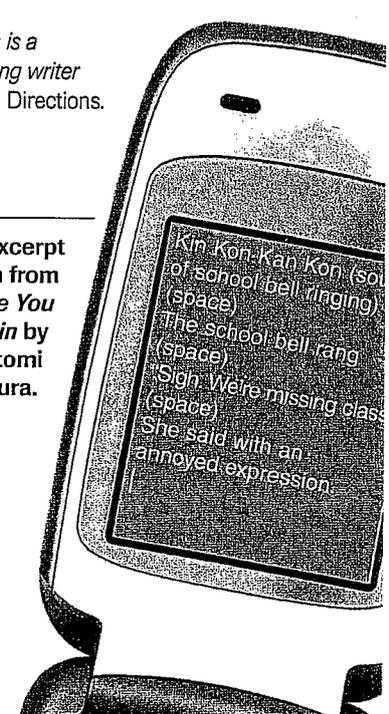
"There is actually an art to creating a message for a cell screen," she says. "It privileges the ability to use shorthand and rewards people for reading subtext, [which is] a fairly sophisticated maneuver."

The idea is reminiscent of such 19th-century British novelists as Charles Dickens, says Yancey,

"We've never had a generation of teens that were more social than this group," she says. "We take very little advantage of that in school." ■

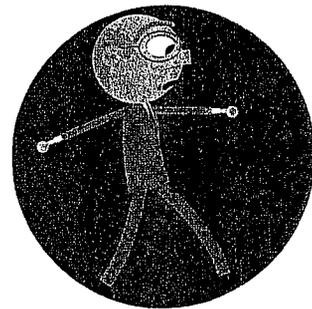
Katie Ash is a contributing writer for Digital Directions.

An excerpt taken from *To Love You Again* by Satomi Nakamura.



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Social Networking_Balancing the Good and Bad



Friend *or* Foe?

By Michelle R. Davis

Pincipal Conn McCartan of Minnesota's Eden Prairie High School had no plans to police the Internet and its social spheres. But in January, he was mailed a computer disk containing photos of students drinking alcohol, and the photos had been posted on the social-networking Web site Facebook. McCartan couldn't ignore the rule-breaking.

McCartan and his staff interviewed 43 students; 13 of them were subsequently disciplined. Most were members of athletic teams and clubs that have specific prohibitions and penalties for underage drinking.

"Facebook is a public site, but we didn't go out there looking for it," McCartan says of the misbehavior that came to light. "Somebody sends us something, and we're obligated to respond."

With the advent and rapid growth of social-networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, an increasingly significant portion of school-age socializing takes place online. The result is that school leaders are being forced to deal with a host of unsettled and even unsavory issues—such as when to monitor students' online activities, and how to deal with the very real results of online socialization that spills into school hallways.

As educators begin to appreciate the influence these cyber networks are having in the world of teenagers, they are also mulling ways of drawing on that electronic muscle to forge a deeper educational connection between students and their studies. But experts say

educators must have a clear vision and guidelines for doing so, or they will face serious technical and legal pitfalls. And, beyond those steps, experts say schools have a role to play in educating students about safely and appropriately using such sites.

"These things are very powerful," says Tom Hutton, a senior staff attorney at the National School Boards Association. "More and more schools are realizing that it's something we should find a way to tap into."

Students are using social-networking sites more than many school officials may realize. Despite the fact that most schools block access to such sites via school computers, 9- to 17-year-olds spend as much time using the Internet for social activities as they spend watching television—about nine hours a week, according to a 2007 study by the Alexandria, Va.-based NSBA. The study of more than 1,200 students found that 96 percent of those with online access had used social-networking technology—including text messaging—and 81 percent said they had visited a social-networking Web site at least once within the three months before the study was conducted.

More and more, those sites have become places where students engage in public actions or behaviors they probably don't want their principals or teachers to know about. Students in New York City's Staten Island borough were unmasked as graffiti artists earlier this

year after posting pictures and video of their "tags" on MySpace and the video site YouTube. In York, Pa., 18 high school students faced disciplinary action after Facebook photos surfaced showing students with alcohol. The list of students nabbed for improper behavior through posts on social-networking sites reaches across the country.

Though most school administrators don't spend their days trolling such sites for evidence of students' unseemly actions—and don't want to—they're regularly faced with deciding when to follow up on tips or rumors.

"Does a school's authority reach out to that wacky party on Saturday night that was documented by cellphones?" says Timothy J. Magner, the director of the U.S. Department of Education's office of educational technology. "It's clearly one of those evolving community dialogues."

McCartan, the principal in the 10,000-student Eden Prairie school district, says even if school officials say they're not going to monitor students' behavior on the Internet, administrators need to be prepared when such a situation arises. At Eden Prairie High, school leaders had already talked with families about the importance of monitoring social-networking sites and discussed "what happens when we would receive this type of information and how we would react," McCartan says.

"We thought this through ahead of time, and went through our own guidelines and consulted with legal counsel," he says. "We knew if we proceeded this

“Remember, these sites were not created so that adults could reach out to students. They were created for students to reach out to each other.”

—Montana Miller, Assistant Professor
Bowling Green State University

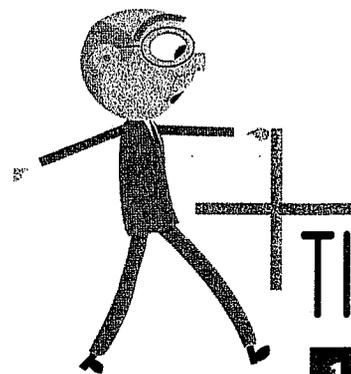
these Web pages or even blogs with students outside of the school day on home/personal computers.

McCartan: We have spoken to our staff about using the same guidelines they use for face-to-face social interactions with students when they think about social-networking interactions. While we do not want to infringe upon speech rights, we have told them that professional guidelines would direct them to limit their electronic interactions with students to academic sites rather than social sites. Add to that the fact that every interaction is a permanent record that can be sent and re-sent to thousands of other people in seconds. We have discouraged our staff from interacting with students on social-networking sites.

Have there been any studies done to show that these social-networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace have been successful in reaching out to students in a positive way?

Miller: I don't think so. Remember, these sites were not created so that adults could "reach out to students." They were created for students to reach out to each other! I think there is enormous ambivalence among the student population when it comes to adults being on Facebook at all, and the sense that this is THEIR territory is strong. Again, I feel it is intrusive when teachers request that students connect with them through these social-networking sites—it's like inviting yourself to their parties.

To read or print a full transcript of this discussion, go to www.digitaldirections.org/go/chat/networking.



TIPS

way with this information, that we were rock solid.”

Montana Miller, an assistant professor of popular culture at Bowling Green State University in Ohio and an expert on Facebook, says the issue remains complicated. Policies are still developing, and legal issues surrounding social-networking sites have not been settled.

“There's very little precedent to go on, and it's important to remember to take each case in its own context,” Miller says. “I do not think that schools should try to monitor and control Facebook the way they might try to monitor and control on-campus student expression in a traditional way.”

Miller acknowledges that the rules for school administrators are “murky,” but agrees that school leaders should discuss strategies for handling situations connected to social-networking sites before being faced with a dilemma.

“The key is that each school needs to have a discussion and come up with a policy, and then that policy has to be made clear to teachers, parents, and students,” she says. “Then that policy has to be followed. It's really important not to play fast and loose with these policies, because that's so hypocritical.”

All the cyber socializing by students in their after-school hours inevitably leaks into schools. In the 137,000-student Montgomery County, Md., public schools, Walt Whitman High School had two recent social situations that went from the virtual world to reality. In April, Whitman Principal Alan S. Goodwin handled two separate incidents in which taunting and name-calling on Facebook resulted in physical fights at school. Two of the students fighting were girls, and two were boys.

Goodwin put out an e-mail asking parents to closely monitor what their children were writing on Facebook and to consider calling the police if a student was being bullied online. A new Maryland law adds cyber bullying to the legal definition of bullying in the state and requires school boards to write anti-bullying policies by next year.

“One of the problems with Facebook

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1. Establish a policy for dealing with incidents in which students break school rules and their inappropriate behavior showcased publicly on social-networking sites

2. Outline clear guidelines for administrators that spell out how schools should discipline students based on information garnered from social-networking sites, and let parents and students know about those rules.

3. Educate students about online-safety issues and how to use sites such as Facebook and MySpace responsibly.

4. Have a policy in place for dealing with cyber bullying.

5. If teachers are using social-networking sites for educational purposes, they should establish clear guidelines for how they intend to communicate with students via those sites



Facebook, MySpace, online communication, text messaging, and instant messaging are all integral parts of the social world of young people, and to tell them to turn off the computer is not the answer."

—Montana Miller, Assistant Professor, Bowling Green State University



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is that people are more willing to say things there than they ever would to a person's face," Goodwin says. "If two kids are name-calling, their friends are on Facebook too, watching it. ... They try to incite the situation."

Many schools felt compelled to develop cyber-bullying policies after the suicide last year of a 13-year-old Missouri girl, Megan Meier, who was the victim of virtual bullying through her MySpace page. Even so, some school officials still don't understand the impact such harassment can have, says Miller, the Facebook expert.

"Never respond with 'Just turn off the computer,'" she says. "That's completely missing the essential nature of what it is to be a young person today. Facebook, MySpace, online communication, text messaging, and instant messaging are all integral parts of the social world of young people, and to tell them to turn off the computer is not the answer."

McCartan says his approach to online bullying mirrors the one he'd take with

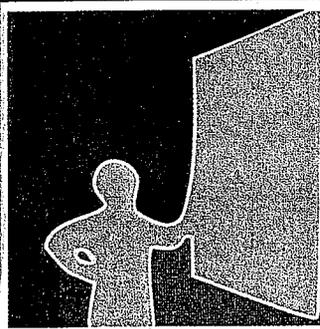
verbal or physical bullying that occurs in person and off school grounds.

"We've been well served by reacting the same way we would to this information if it came to us any other way," the Minnesota principal says. "Just because it exists online or in the electronic community instead of person to person, let's apply the exact same standards."

Hutton of the NSBA advises school leaders to first try mediating between the students and getting the parents involved. He says the same goes for situations in which school leaders may be alerted to pictures of students consuming alcohol or drugs, but in ways that don't directly tie to school disciplinary infractions.

"School safety officers may be plugging in the name of their school [in an online search] and seeing what's out there, but it doesn't give them carte blanche to go after people," he says. "We urge school boards and lawyers to talk through this and be very assertive about where your authority is." ■

Michelle R. Davis is the senior writer for Digital Directions.



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