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RIT aims to protect kids in cyberspace

Survey hopes to ease dangers in computer world for area kids

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HENRIETTA — The pervert with a fake online persona chatting — and trying to arrange a meeting — with your child may be a parent's worst nightmare.

But the digital age of the Web, MySpace and instant messaging has opened the doors to other problems, from "cyberbullying" to academic dishonesty and password theft.

Samuel C. McQuade, a researcher at Rochester Institute of Technology, plans to survey tens of thousands of local children, teachers and parents as soon as this spring to gauge the size of the "cybercrime" phenomenon among youths. The goal is find the scope of the problem, so school districts tackle it.

"The confluence of technologies — not just the home computer, it's cell phones, it's instant messaging, all that kind of stuff — is really coming together to create a world (where) we don't talk about much in terms of safety and ethics," said Christopher Manaseri, superintendent of Brighton Central Schools, one of the participating districts. "How should people interact with one another in this brave new world?"

Five separate anonymous online surveys for students in grades kindergarten through 12 will increase in sophistication and depth by age. Two other surveys will be for parents and teachers.

For high school sophomores, juniors and seniors, for example, the survey tries to get a handle on how much supervision they receive when e-mailing or working on personal Web pages; how often they confess personal information to people they've never met in person; and how frequently they've been harassed or threatened online.

A variety of instructional and curricular resources already exists to address issues of behavior in cyberspace, from NetSmartz, created by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, to i-SAFE, created by a California nonprofit group.

The RIT effort, Rochester Regional Cyber Safety and Ethics Initiative, is inventorying and analyzing those tools so it can make recommendations to districts about which to use.

"Our country has fixated on enforcement strategies, and it's about time we get serious about education," said McQuade, likening the idea to driver's education for "safe computing."

McQuade, graduate program coordinator for RIT's Center for Multidisciplinary Studies, is author of the 2006 book *Understanding and Managing Cybercrime*. He and RIT graduate student Nate Fisk plan to crunch the data from the online surveys over the summer.

Each district will get data on its own students, plus information on how it stacks up against other area school districts.

Plans for subsequent years of the research effort range from implementing educational interventions at local districts to exploring ways of doing similar training in the adult work force, McQuade said.

"We think we are creating a national demonstration project here," McQuade said.

Students at Wheatland-Chili schools get sporadic, piecemeal instruction on how to behave online, said district Superintendent Thomas Gallagher.

The district hopes to develop or adopt curriculum based on what the survey finds out.

The Greece Central School District plans to put together instruction on cybersafety and security-related topics for next school year, said Scott Chase, co-president of the Greece Parent Teacher Association Council and father of two students at Greece Odyssey Academy.

The topic "absolutely needs attention," Chase said, recalling an episode of the "To Catch a Predator" series on the newsmagazine *Dateline NBC*, which he watched with his children.

"The variety of men who are preying on what they think are little kids is astounding," he said, adding that his children "were flabbergasted as well."

Chase talked to his kids about not giving out personal information over the Internet or meeting in person people they've met over the Internet.

But, he added, "I'd suspect there are many parents who've not had that conversation."

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What's at stake

The safety of our children. Research indicates that the number of offenses online among and against children is rising as youths increasingly use the Internet for recreation and schoolwork.

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