

Cyber Sense

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Trooper Nick Nigro, stationed in the Mat-Su Valley, talks Cyber Safety with eighth grade students at Colony Middle School.

A little more than 700 students walk the halls at Colony Middle School (CMS) in Palmer, Alaska. Angie Buresh, a CMS Guidance Counselor, estimates that approximately 80 percent of those students have cell phones they carry with them. Many of those students also have access to social media. With the student body being so well connected, bullying and other inappropriate activity can be done at their fingertips. This issue is not unique to CMS. Alaska State Troopers suspect most middle schools in Alaska are experiencing a similar trend.

Buresh estimates that approximately 50 percent of CMS's harassment reports stem from social media and/or texting. It is primarily a problem in the eighth grade; however, by second semester, the middle school starts hearing of more issues popping up surrounding social media at the seventh grade level. Buresh's biggest concern is some of the activity goes beyond schoolyard bullying, some of it is actually criminal and can have huge repercussions.

"I can say it all day long but they won't listen," Buresh says. "I wanted someone in uniform to come and explain it. It'll have more of an impression."

Trooper Nick Nigro gladly accepted the invitation to make that impression and presented to the eighth graders on a Friday morning. He spent a couple days putting together a PowerPoint presentation on Cyber Crimes and Cyber Safety, specifically for his young audience.

"I want to minimize the risk by arming you with knowledge to keep you out of trouble as a victim and an offender," Trooper Nigro said as he stood in front of a group of about 70 eighth graders.

In his presentation, Trooper Nigro outlined a few felony-level crimes that are happening via messaging and social media. If bullying messages involve threats of physical harm, it can be considered Harassment II, (AS 11.61.120). Kids taking nude or partially nude photos of themselves are essentially creating child pornography. When they share it with other kids, it is distributing child pornography, (AS 11.61.125 and AS 11.61.116). When students view the photos, it is possession of child pornography, (AS 11.61.127).



As a trooper," Trooper Nigro said, "I have noticed an increase of these cases right here in the Valley. We can make it better and deal with it."

Trooper Nigro also pointed out that people who use social media to commit crimes can't easily hide. "If you commit a crime, promise me you will do it online because I will find you like that." Trooper Nigro punctuated his statement with a snap of his fingers. "It makes my job so much easier."

The Monday morning after the presentation, Buresh was happy to report that Trooper Nigro's messages appeared to have some-what made an impact. The usual reports that come in first thing in the morning after a weekend were noticeably absent.

"I think he commanded their attention, spoke casually yet cited the law, and I would like to have him every year," Buresh said. "As of 9:40 a.m. today, I have not had any parent or student report further harassment concerns!"

