

Thomas County Schools promote responsible “Digital Citizenship”

With more than 93% of students between the ages of 12 and 17 nationally being “on-line” and with 88% regularly using social media sites, (Pew Research, *Internet and American Life Project*), the Thomas County School System has launched an initiative to encourage responsible use of the Internet among its students by encouraging them to practice responsible “Digital Citizenship.”

“For the last several years, we have seen an increase in the percentage of school disciplinary issues that stem from interactions among students on social media sites,” said Superintendent Dr. Dusty Kornegay. “We decided last spring as an administrative team to address this issue at both the middle and high school grades by engaging students in discussions about the proper use of the Internet in general and social media in particular,” Kornegay said.

Thomas County Central High School (TCCHS) Assistant Principal Trista Jones said the administrators’ goals are two-fold: education and protection. “We want to educate our students about the consequences of using social media inappropriately. We want them to understand that posting something negative or inappropriate is hurtful to them and to others. There are consequences that they often do not consider before making the decision to post comments, pictures or videos online. We also want to protect our students. Social media postings can potentially impact hundreds of students at once, causing disruptions which detract from learning,” Jones said.

Thomas County Middle School (TCMS) Principal Dr. Kathy Keown noted, “Our students are on-line every day. They have access to the Internet through computers, phones, and other electronic devices. Many of them communicate as much on-line as they do face-to-face.”

Dr. Woody Thompson who retired from the Thomas County School System in 2009 as Director of Student Services and who now works independently as a Licensed Professional Counselor has assisted the school system with the Digital Citizenship initiative.

“Last year I met with middle school students to talk about digital citizenship and cyber bullying which led to a discussion about how to keep safe on the Internet,” Thompson said. “This year we are talking about social media use.”

“Many students report that social media is the primary way that they interact with their friends. We are discussing how face-to-face interactions are different than social media-based interactions, how teenagers treat each other online, and the idea that they are leaving a digital footprint that may reflect on them in the future – which leads to the saying ‘*Think twice before you post,*’” Thompson said.

So far, the social media initiative has consisted of presentations by Thompson to every class at TCMS during exploratory class periods. At the high school, Thompson led a video-taped student panel discussion that was shown to the entire school during advisement period. The video was followed by guided small group discussions led by teachers.

Throughout the initiative, students identified their parents as having the greatest influence on their on-line behavior. “We view this as extremely positive and hope that this project will encourage more dialogue between parents and their children about proper use of the Internet,” Kornegay said.

The panel discussion led by Dr. Thompson along with other resources for parents to use in talking with their children about social media is posted on the school system’s website at www.thomas.k12.ga.us.

“Many people feel bolder or more empowered and even take on a different persona when they communicate on-line . . . they almost feel anonymous,” Thompson said.

Thompson told students, “Posting on-line is like writing in pen instead of pencil; it is permanent.”

Thompson cautioned students about the “digital footprint” that they create on-line. “It is not uncommon for personnel managers to ask an individual in an interview to log onto their Facebook page to show what is posted on-line.” Thompson said that this is known as “shoulder surfing” and that some employers are using this technique to screen potential employees.

Students learned that as much as 85% of how we communicate is non-verbal, through body language, rate of speech, how loud or soft we speak, and our tone of voice. “Those kinds of things are missing when students communicate on-line,” Thompson noted.

TCCHS sophomore Faith Miller observed that social media postings can lead to disagreements or fights. “You might be joking, but on the Internet you can’t really tell. You have to be careful with what you post,” she said. “Most people say things on-line that they would not say face-to-face. They feel safe behind the screen.”

“I feel that it is extremely important that we educate students about the permanence of their entries on social media sites,” Cindy Carnes, TCCHS Early Childhood Education teacher, said. “Years ago, we could tear up a note or a picture that we were not proud of, but today every person is a published author as soon as they hit ‘send.’ Their comments or posts can never be fully deleted. While I am sure that bullying is an issue, it is still important that students realize that their own reputations are on the line when they communicate using social media. They should err on the side of caution!” Carnes said.

Jackson NeSmith, a TCMS eighth grader stated, “I think Dr. Thompson did a good job of teaching us about the Internet and the importance of knowing how to use it. We can get in trouble with it if we’re not careful.”

Bryce Barwick, a Thomas County Upper Elementary sixth grader, commented, “The social media presentation was good. Dr. Thompson gave us a lot of facts about what to do and what not to do with social media. We talked a lot about using Smart Phones. He made me think that I might need to be more careful about using my Smart Phone.”

TCMS teacher Lisa Gilligan noted, “Today’s generation of young people has grown up with the Internet as a part of their everyday lives, and sometimes they do not realize the consequences of their online behavior. It is our job as educators to make them aware of the consequences and dangers that can be associated with social networking, including cyber bullying, predators, etc. As a faculty, we are very appreciative of Dr. Thompson coming to talk with our students about social media – both the good and bad of social media.”

Following the viewing of the panel discussion on digital citizenship at TCCHS, Sophomore Shelby Howard said, “[Internet sites can be] very dangerous and you have to be very careful. It is good that schools are raising awareness that people can be hurt by what others say on the Internet.”

TCCHS Sophomore Faith Miller called upon personal experience to help her participate in the panel discussion. Miller, who said she’d been previously bullied on Facebook over a misunderstanding, remembered how she felt sad and upset at the time. “I knew what to tell people not to do and how people feel when it happens to them,” she said.

TCCHS Senior Rachel Glover observed, "Computers show no emotion so you don't really understand if someone is being sarcastic or just trying to be funny," "People can take it as you're trying to make them feel bad but you're really not, you're just trying to joke around with them."

Junior Kayley Tudor doesn't use social media sites, but she did offer a piece of advice to students who do use them: "If they don't have anything nice to say, don't say it," she said. "It's that simple. Don't hit the ‘enter’ button."

“Every time you push send or enter in that one text or that one message, you are publishing it where it can never be erased,” freshman Carigen Whatley said. “Even if you try to delete it, it might have already hurt that person (you sent it to) and it is going to be saved in a database somewhere no matter what.”

To learn more about Thomas County’s School System’s “Digital Citizenship” initiative, visit the Thomas County School System’s webpage at www.thomas.k12.ga.us or contact Dr. Woody Thompson at woody@woodythompsoncounseling.com.