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Saugus middle school to tackle cyberbullying

Chris Stevens The Daily Item

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After watching the issue of cyberbullying unravel in South Hadley, the Belmonte Middle School decided it was time to hold a workshop on the issue. Josh Gunderson, a Salem State graduate and award-winning director and speaker, will put on a presentation for parents beginning at 6 p.m. at the middle school tonight. Assistant Principal Myra Monto said she thought the presentation was much needed.

Cyberbullying has made headlines since 15-year-old Phoebe Prince killed herself as a result of alleged cyberbullying by a number of her classmates at South Hadley High School.

Cyberbullying is when one youth is tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed or otherwise targeted by another youth using cell phones, social networking sites or other types of digital and interactive technologies.

Monto said Gunderson has a program that explains how it happens and just how dangerous it can be. But Monto said it isn't just the kids who need to be made aware of the issue.

"I felt it was important to have the parents here," she said, adding she not only wants parents to know the signs of cyberbullying, but also to understand how destructive it can be for all those involved.

"Some people just don't realize how damaging it can be," she said. "We have seen it here in our hallways." Monto did not elaborate on how cyberbullying has manifested itself at the Belmonte, but she said she is aware of it among students.

"It happens outside of school and trickles in," she said.

While it is never easy to preach to students, Monto said Gunderson has been doing his program for years, has a large following and has been quite successful.

According to his Web site, www.joshgunderson.com, the focus for middle and high school presentations is on the pros and cons of online social networking Web sites, cell phones and other technology and he connects with students with humor and by "speaking with them rather than at them." Parents will get a taste tonight, followed by a presentation specifically designed for the students Friday.

"So it will be school-wide presentation," Monto said. "He'll talk about Facebook, MySpace, instant messaging and bullying and he'll tell everyone how it works." Gunderson is not the only one spreading the message.

Teachers and school administrators also took part in a cyberbullying workshop last week conducted by District Attorney Jonathan Blodgett's office with an eye on how to recognize and deal with the issue.

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