

TAKING LIBERTIES: A Vermont Father's Mission to End Cyberbullying

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Ryan Halligan in 2003.

John Halligan is on a mission and he admits it's completely personal.

"I'm doing this for my son," he said as he walked down Main Street in White River Junction, Vermont.

Halligan's 13 year-old son Ryan committed suicide in 2003, and Halligan blames cyberbullying.

"He was bullied at school about being potentially gay," he explained, tears welling up in his eyes. "And then it spread on the Internet in the evening mainly through instant messaging."

Halligan is now waging a campaign of his own to raise awareness about the dangers of cyberbullying. He says the Internet has given school-yard bullies an incredibly powerful tool to harass, intimidate and, in his son's case, humiliate.

The rumors went around like wildfire, he said, recalling that almost everyone in his son's middle school, located in Essex Junction Vermont, had almost instant access to the postings about him.

Halligan now spends much of his time traveling around the country, speaking at elementary schools to students his son's

age.

In addition, he's also trying to convince state legislators to enact laws to prevent student-on-student Internet harassment.

And he's meeting with some success.

Forty-five states now have laws that address school bullying, and 12 states are considering laws against bullying over the Internet.

It's a trend that has some free speech advocates worried.

"There is no agreement as to what cyberbullying means," says Harvey Silverglate, an attorney with the Cato Institute specializing in the Constitution.

"So you are going to have these codes that are written and they're inevitably going to infringe on free speech."

He points out it took decades for courts to define "harassment," in the sexual harassment fights that emerged in the 1960s. He predicts an even longer struggle to define cyberbullying.

"It will take 50 years to figure out what's bullying and what is the normal give and take among children." In the meantime, Silverglate predicts political correctness will run amuck.

"The First Amendment is going to take a real hit," he says.

Silverglate also worries about legislating off-campus behavior for students.

"Students mostly use computers at home," he explained. "This is going to create a set of rules in the home that will inevitably invade the province that has traditionally been left to the parents."

Halligan disagrees. He says problems during the day at school often start at home on the computer the night before.

"I think what we're really trying to do is give the schools an opportunity to discipline students when they create problems

for themselves the night before,” he said.