

Anonymous 'Confessions' account raises questions

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Updated:

ydr.com

York County officials have their eyes on a Twitter account that solicits what appear to be rumors, or as it deems them, "confessions" from local high school students.

The "confessions" Twitter account posted its first tweet Jan. 22. As of Monday, it had 259 tweets and had accumulated 2,056 followers.

The majority of the tweets mention casual sex and drug abuse, and some include graphic name-calling and insults directed at various schools. Some mention first names, and a few mention first and last names.

The proprietor of the account acknowledges that there may be some possible recourse by authorities. One post states, "By viewing this page you are agreeing to never pursue legal action against us. Also we are not responsible for any outcomes of this page and have by no means of controlling them."

Another post states, "We put quotation marks in our tweets for a reason: To prevent legal issues and suspensions."

No one answered the number provided on the account for leaving "confessions."

The person on the account responded to a reporter in a text that they wanted to remain anonymous for safety reasons, "in case anyone sees something they don't like."

Under its rules section, Twitter states it prohibits what it calls "targeted abuse and harassment." A spokesperson for Twitter could not be reached for comment.

York County District Attorney Tom Kearney said Monday he and his detectives took a look at the account, after being alerted, and didn't see anything that would fall under the Pennsylvania Crimes Code.

"Morally, I think it's reprehensible," he said, but, "As we looked at the website ... they didn't get a sense that there was any wrongdoing."

Kearney said that at present, there are no state statutes that prohibit cyber bullying.

"For all we know, it's just a person running the page," he said. "There's proof problems here in proving who did the postings."

However, someone might have recourse if they filed a civil lawsuit against the account, he said.

Similar Twitter accounts have popped up in neighboring counties and beyond. Cumberland Valley School District was monitoring a "hate" account, and Lancaster County districts were aware of "crushes" accounts, where posters anonymously talk about their crushes, according to news reports.

Lisa Smith, spokeswoman for the Spring Grove Area School District, wasn't aware of the county "confessions" account but said a parent notified the district of a similar Twitter account, focused on Spring Grove, over the weekend. The account, which had "pretty objectionable" posts, was later suspended by Twitter, Smith said, though she's not sure what triggered that.

"It's really very sad that we cannot get it across to kids and even some young adults you put it out there, it's there. Forever," Smith said.

Smith said bullying and cyber bullying are frequently talked about with students. Anti-bullying efforts start with kindergarten and by high school include talking about the "digital world," she said.

"It's a common topic focus, one we continue to emphasize," she said. The issue will probably come up again with counselors and in meetings, and the district can otherwise just be supportive of any kids who might have been targeted.

"Luckily, there are a lot of really good kids who know this isn't the way to act," she said, and they sometimes bring things to the forefront.

Michelle Nutter, safe and supportive schools manager for the Camp Hill-based Center for Safe Schools, said that anonymous mean and hurtful comments online put the target at a disadvantage, because they can't defend themselves or don't even know who is targeting them.

"If they're just mean, intentionally hurtful we certainly can look at that as cyber bullying," she said. From a legal perspective, if there are ongoing and repeated comments about someone, they could fall into the category of harassment or be something that police would look into, though anonymity can make that difficult.

It's best for kids not to engage, she said. If a student feels targeted, parents should find out if it is spilling over into school, which can make sure students are feeling safe and protected.

Nutter said with cyber or digital bullying, anonymity plays into it because there's "that belief that I can do this mean thing, and it won't come back to me," she said, adding that in most instances, it isn't true and online activity can be traced.

Witold "Vic" Walczak, legal director for the Pennsylvania ACLU, said that protected speech can include things that are tasteless.

For something to cross the line, he said, "it would really have to be targeted and severe and persistent." If that happens, it can lose its constitutional protection or become a police matter.

If it causes a student to suffer, then schools can try to take action to help the victim, he said.

"Folks including kids should not fool themselves that just because they may post something anonymously that it's not ultimately traceable," he said.

Twitter prohibits

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"You may not engage in targeted abuse or harassment," according to Twitter. "Some of the factors that we take into account when determining what conduct is considered to be targeted abuse or harassment are: if you are sending messages to a user from multiple accounts; if the sole purpose of your account is to send abusive messages to others; if the reported behavior is one-sided or includes threats."

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