

Politicians, Facebook Representatives Discuss Online Safety

At high school forum, students told to report malicious behavior



Seated left to right, Superintendent of Kalispell Public Schools Darlene Schottle, Superintendent of Public Instruction Denise Juneau, Attorney General Steve Bullock, Lieutenant Governor John Bohlinger, Sen. Jon Tester and Kalispell Mayor Tammi Fisher listen as Facebook representative Corey Owens, far right, talks about online safety during a community forum at Flathead High School. - Lido Vizzutti/Flathead Beacon

By [Molly Priddy](#), 01-06-12

On Thursday, Montana U.S. Sen. Jon Tester asked the crowd in the nearly full Flathead High School auditorium to raise their hand if they were on Facebook.

Nearly every hand, including those belonging to teachers and visiting parents, went up.

Tester, in town for the educational forum on online safety, told the audience that social media sites such as Facebook are going to be part of their future and they will offer opportunities as the world continues to connect through the Internet.

“It also opens up threats and dangers,” Tester said. “We need to have tools and we need to be smart.”

The Jan. 5 forum included a panel of local and state officials: Tester, Kalispell Mayor Tammi Fisher, Lt. Gov. John Bohlinger, state Attorney General Steve Bullock, state Superintendent of Public Education Denise Juneau and School District 5 Superintendent Darlene Schottle.

All of the public officials said they hope to make the Internet a safer place for children and teenagers, but it is a constantly evolving space. Fisher said she made plenty of mistakes as a teen, and is proof that “you can screw up” and still succeed.

“But at least [my mistakes] weren’t part of the permanent record on the Internet,” Fisher said.

Bullock said there is a law enforcement presence dedicated to finding predators online, whether the public sees them or not, but it is still important to guard against potential threats.

Juneau noted that while online safety is a major concern, she is also concerned about how Internet bullying gets in the way of students’ ability to perform in school. A problem that began online can quickly transfer to the classroom, she said.

“This really is about you and your safety,” Juneau said.

Facebook also had representation in Corey Owens, an associate manager in public policy, and Director of Public Policy Louisa Terrell.

During his presentation, Owens taught explained to the audience the difference between anonymity and authenticity online, and about being wary of whom to trust on the Internet.

Anonymity encourages rule breaking, he said. On Facebook, users have a name and a face, and other users can report bad behavior, leading to real accountability, he said.

If someone is bullying another person, the victim has several options, Owens said. They can block the offender, making both people invisible to each other. They can also report the incident to Facebook, as well as an authority figure.

An authority figure can be contacted through their Facebook page or with an email address, Owens said. Reporting is confidential, so the accused bully won’t know who did it, he added.

Online safety is a conversation, Owens said, and parents and teenagers – no one under 13 is supposed to be on Facebook – can visit www.facebook.com/safety for more information.

Questions from students and parents included inquiries about the safety of the games offered on Facebook, to which Owens said players should be mindful of the information they share.

An elementary school counselor asked what she should do if she knows her students are on Facebook, despite being second- and third-graders. Owens said Facebook takes these reports seriously, and the counselor should flag these accounts.

Owens also suggested that parents explore Facebook with their own profile before allowing their

kids online, so they can have a presence and keep track of their child's profile. Facebook does not allow parents to secretly monitor their children's accounts, he said.

Another student asked how to combat anonymous pages set up to bully people, and Owens said the page may look anonymous to the public, but Facebook knows who set it up and can take action against that person if the site is reported.

He also warned against sharing too much information.

With over 160 million people on Facebook in the U.S. and over 460,000 in Montana, the site is a large "neighborhood watch program," Owens said, because law enforcement can't be expected to police everything online.

"We are more responsible for keeping each other safe" than the cops, he said.

For more information on Facebook safety, visit www.facebook.com/safety and find updates at www.facebook.com/fbsafety. For additional online safety resources, visit www.doj.mt.gov/safeinyourspace.