

More students switch to online schools to escape bullies

December 5 2013, by Meagan Pant

Krista Hooten saw "terror" in her daughter's eyes as they started back-to-school shopping for seventh grade.

Her daughter, Kelsey, had been bullied the previous year. It started emotionally: Other girls called her ugly and spread rumors about her. But it quickly turned physical: They pulled her hair on the bus and shoved her to the ground.

"It changed her personality," Hooten said. "It was a horrible, horrible year."

Hooten and her husband decided that night they had to make a change. They pulled Kelsey from public [school](#) and enrolled her online, through a charter school affiliated with the national education company K12.

Nearly a quarter of parents who enroll their children in K12 programs said bullying is a reason they removed their children from brick-and-mortar schools, according to a recent survey.

About 94 percent of those parents said going online helped address the issue, the survey commissioned by K12 found.

But bullying is a larger issue than that in America.

One-third of all children - an estimated 13 million [students](#) nationwide - are targeted each year, according to the White House. Those students are

"more likely to have challenges in school, to abuse drugs and alcohol, and to have health and [mental health issues](#)." In some widely publicized cases, victims have committed suicide.

Krista Hooten said her daughter did not vocalize the extent to which she was bullied during sixth grade at Northeastern Local Schools district in Clark County.

Even when the attacks became physical, the Springfield teenager would "come home and not act like it was fine, but act like she was dealing with it and it wasn't that big a deal," Hooten said.

"All I knew at that point was she didn't want to go to the point where she would leave in the morning, she cried all the way to the bus stop," she said.

Hooten said she talked to her daughter's teachers and school administrators but, "their suggestion was: Just tell her to find another group of friends."

Now 16 and in 10th grade, Kelsey said she has been able to escape bullying since she started attending the Ohio Virtual Academy.

The academy now enrolls more than 12,600 students across the state, according to the Ohio Department of Education. It was given an "F" for the indicators it met on the latest state report card, which measures what percent of students passed achievement and graduation tests. About 42 percent of its students graduate in four years, according to its latest [report card](#).

Students are given home computers, printers and a microscope and watch live videos and do chats with licensed teachers.

The online school was created in 2006, and has grown as an option for bullied students even as cyberbullying has become more prominent.

While bullying has always been an issue, one of the reasons it is more discussed today is the rise in activity online, said Susan Davies, school psychology program coordinator at the University of Dayton.

She trains school psychologists on how to recognize, react to and prevent it.

"Because of cyberbullying, students can't escape it," she said. "It's not something that's just happening at school. They're being targeted in their home when they're not even around other kids. That has become really difficult to address at the school level because there's kind of that question: Where does our jurisdiction end when it's our students that we're caring for throughout the day being bullied through the Internet?"

"The kids are so savvy that they're kind of escaping notice of the adults in their lives. As soon as we get on whatever the next hot social media site is and start monitoring kids on Facebook. Well, Facebook isn't cool anymore, we're going to move to Twitter. And we're going to move to Instagram. It's hard for us to monitor them."

The Ohio Virtual Academy is not immune to cyberbullying, but does have a zero-tolerance policy, like many schools, said Kristin Stewart, senior head of school.

The school has expelled and suspended students in the past, though it's not common, she said.

The academy trains its teacher to look for signs of bullying, and Stewart said she thinks "in some ways it's brought to light even sooner because the teachers are online with students."

"Sometimes it takes these students a little bit to earn trust back," Stewart said. "But once they do, we have - especially in middle school and high school - we have blogs and Facebook where kids can go online and meet each other. They can approach getting back to school safely because they're in their homes and they're feeling safe. They can move at their own pace."

The school also offers extra curriculums, dances and other get-togethers for students.

Students also choose the school because they are struggling in certain subjects, because their families rely on them to work, because they have children of their own or because they want to challenge themselves, Stewart said.

Hooten's two other daughters also attend the Ohio Virtual Academy. Lexie, 14, started to give herself more time for her 20-hour-a-week dance commitment. Hannah, 11, enrolled because she was missing many days of traditional school due to her asthma.

Kelsey will begin next year taking college courses for free through the state's postsecondary enrollment option.

Her mother said the change in her personality was almost immediate after she left public school.

"She was just happier again," she said. "You just really underestimate, even though she's beautiful ... it's amazing what peers can do when they're telling you the opposite."

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