

Vermont students rally against cyberbullying

December 10 2014, by Dave Gram

Students at a Vermont high school are winning praise for their efforts to fight back against online bullying. After a burst of negative posts last week on an anonymous school news app, students at Rutland High School organized a counterattack.

They petitioned the creators of the After School app to take their school's message board down, and then launched a "Positive Post-it" campaign, in which small notes offering praise and encouragement to fellow students were stuck to bulletin boards and windows around the school.

The also petitioned the tech giant Apple to remove After School from its App Store. An Apple spokesman said Tuesday evening that the company had agreed with that request and removed the app.

The app's intended use is to help students to form groups tied to a specific school and post anonymous messages about local goings-on.

Instead, comments on Rutland High School's app were "negative, obscene," said Principal Bill Olsen. "There was some sexual stuff (and) surveys about people that were not positive."

Senior Eric Gokee said he was labeled on the app as "the biggest Jew at Rutland High School." He was one of five students who spoke Thursday during morning announcements, introducing himself by saying, "Some of you may know me as the biggest Jew at Rutland High School." He added in an interview a few days later he was voted as such in a survey

on the app.

"I never downloaded the app, but I knew what was going on just from my friends. Everyone was talking about it," Gokee said.

Sophomore Molly Engels, president of a student group, Cyber You, which is devoted to responsible Internet use, said Tuesday, "It was a big wakeup call to see so many people affected by it in a negative way."

The Rutland students' anti-bullying efforts, first reported during the weekend by the Rutland Herald, drew praise Tuesday from Gov. Peter Shumlin.

"The students' campaign "makes me realize that people of all ages can do the right thing and doing so can send a powerful message," the governor said in a statement.

After School co-founder Cory Levy defended the [app](#), calling it a "blank sheet of paper" that leaves students to decide what to write on it.

"We've only just gotten to know these students," Levy wrote in an email Tuesday. "Their parents have had years to shape their morals and build good decision making skills."

John Halligan, who has been an anti-bullying activist since his son, Ryan, committed suicide in 2003 following intense online bullying by fellow [middle school students](#) in Essex, said he had spoken to Rutland [students](#) two years ago.

"I'm really proud of these kids," he said, adding they had gotten the message to "stand up for one another and push back against the bullying behavior."

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