# future focus

Bullying ruins the lives of its victims and there's evidence that, left unchecked, bullies take their manipulative ways with them as they enter the workplace. Duncan Peberdy looks at the way technology is making a difference in schools

Four out of 10 pupils will be bullied during their school years. Whether you're a parent or grandparent, this statistic makes uncomfortable reading. But technology is playing an increasingly important role in the fight to stamp out school bullying.

Harassment, in all its forms, interferes with the victim's education, often resulting in lower examination grades. And, due to the increased use of technology in the schoolplace, non-violent bullies nowadays have greater access to their victims through anonymous text messages and email. This practice has, thankfully, been recognised, so mobile phone companies and internet service providers are joining in the fight to detect those guilty of such mental cruelty. Schools are increasingly banning mobile phones – something that's due at least in part to teaching staff and school governors' legal obligations to deal with bullying.

Previous generations paid termly for school meals – you either ate what was presented in front of you or left it. Today, secondary school students have an extensive lunch menu, served cafeteria style, with the total being paid in cash – a typical selection costing between £1.10 and £1.50. This means that children are carrying money to school on a daily basis, so the opportunity for bullies to extort cash has grown.

## Telling tales

Technology is positively assisting in combating this trend. Catering contractors Sodexho (www.sodexho.co.uk) provide cafeteria-style meal services in hundreds of schools across the UK. Though some schools still operate on a cash basis, the trend is towards using cashless smartcard systems that mean pupils are less likely to be pounced on for their dinner money.

Parents can add funds to their child's smartcard over the internet using a credit or debit card. They can also control the card's usage, such as a maximum daily spend. If a child spends £1.10 of their £1.50 limit, that 40p change is no longer a lure for bullies – neither can it disappear

limit on the smartcard, so their offspring can only have burger and chips as a weekly treat. Sodexho presents nutritional information online and the company encourages healthy eating options, rewarding students for eating salads, rice and pasta with a points-based incentive scheme redeemable for CDs, books and other items.

Another benefit of the cashless smartcard system is that meals can be paid for more quickly, helping ease lunchtime tension as students jostle for position in the queue.

The next step? Fingerprint scanners. At present, bullies may fraudulently use someone else's card, even though the photo ID clearly shows it isn't theirs, until the deception is detected and the card

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into the sweet shop on the way home. Pupils qualifying for free school meals are given identical smartcards, cutting out the opportunity for other forms of bullying against them.

Parents can track their child's daily purchases on Sodexho's smartcard website (www.edzone-online.co.uk) so, if their daughter is a vegetarian and she appears to be using her smartcard to buy meat products, chances are she's not spending the money on herself.

## Bully for you

There are many influences that can lead to a student becoming a bully; low academic achievement, diet and home circumstances are among them. In terms of diet, then, parents can set a junk food

cancelled. After all, how many till operators check the details on every card as they swipe it through? Encrypted fingerprint technology is already in place in some school libraries – using a similar system is no more expensive than a card swipe reader and requiring the person to be present eliminates any possible misuse.

In fact, fingerprint technology could easily be adopted elsewhere in schools to register children's attendance at the start of each lesson. This quick and inexpensive solution would have the extra benefit of reducing any truancy problem by immediately reporting non-attendance at the start of a lesson.

As our feature, *Computer tutor,* on page 176 shows, technology really is changing the face of education. ■

ILLUSTRATION: AILEEN O'DONNELL