



Betsy Blumberg (left) and Melanie Sullivan began blogging last school year. (Dominic Chavez/ Globe Staff)

## Teachers take bulletin boards online Blogs reaching out to students, parents

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By Maria Sacchetti, Globe Staff | September 7, 2006

One Needham teacher gushed about the time a student worried that Australia would fall off the planet -- and how that led to a lesson on gravity. A Brookline teacher banned the word "stuff" from her fourth-graders' vocabulary. A young teacher, also from Needham, got personal, thanking parents for their support after her husband died.

Meet the newest group of bloggers drawing audiences online: teachers.

Teacher-generated blogs have been increasingly popping up from Needham to Martha's Vineyard, many in the past year. Teachers at all grade levels reveal glimpses of themselves as well as the magical moments -- and at times, difficult ones -- that can happen in a classroom. Parents, in turn, scour the blogs, post comments, or borrow snippets to use as dinner conversation with their children.

As students head back to school this week, teachers are again typing dispatches during breaks at school, or from home in their pajamas.

"I can whip out something in maybe five minutes and immediately post it," said Melanie Sullivan, a third-grade teacher in Needham, who started her first classroom blog last school year, when she taught first grade. "Parents just want to know what's going on. The more they know, the more they understand where you're coming from and what you're trying to accomplish in your room, the less they get upset."

Nobody tracks how many Massachusetts teachers use blogs, which are Web logs of text and photos or other add-ons that can be posted anytime. But Will Richardson, a former teacher and author of a new book, "Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms," estimates that, in the last five years, tens of thousands of teachers nationally have been blogging about everything from Harry Potter to writing essays, trying to capitalize on a medium now wildly popular among teenagers. Parents, often alerted by teachers, arrive at the blogs in a variety of ways, sometimes through the school's website or via a portal such as [Blogger.com](http://Blogger.com).

Sullivan and Betsy Blumberg, elementary school teachers at John Eliot School in Needham, started blogging last school year to involve busy parents online.

Both are avid bloggers away from school: Blumberg turned to blogs as a source of support last year, about 18 months after her young husband unexpectedly died from chicken pox. Blumberg said the blog let her express her feelings and allowed friends to check on her.

Then Sullivan, her best friend, followed suit. They branched out to the school after Sullivan read in a teacher magazine that others were trying it. So far they are the school's only bloggers.

The teachers try to avoid identifying students to protect their privacy. But they churn out dispatches, sometimes daily. Sullivan wrote when she did a cartwheel to reward a student's achievement or when the class bid farewell to the baby chicks they hatched. Blumberg used the blog to alert parents when children had trouble with word problems in math.

Parents soaked it in: The day Sullivan taught students to tell time, one mom wrote, "So that's why Ari insisted during dinner last night that he borrow my watch! He gave us updates minute by minute."

Blumberg's blog turned into a chatty community. One student and her mother complained, half-joking, on the blog that the MCAS was on the same day as "American Idol." Another student, sick at home for the day, pouted on the blog when she learned about her homework assignment to study Ohio. "Darn!" the student blogged. "I really wanted North Dakota."

Needham parent Daphne Davidson said the blog gave her something to talk about last school year with her son, then a first-grader. Normally he would shrug and say, "the usual," when she asked about school.

"Instead of saying what did you learn today I would say, you know, I heard that your first-grade class got some chicks," said Davidson, referring to Sullivan's dispatches about the eggs they hatched. "He would get so excited about the subject matter, he would start blabbering on."

Despite their enthusiasm for the blogs, many teachers are also cautious. Teachers and principals worry about online bullying. Congress, concerned about online predators, is considering restrictions on blog access in public schools and libraries.

Bill MacKenty, a former teacher at an Edgartown school on Martha's Vineyard who recently moved to a school in New York, loves the school blogs, but encountered some problems last year when he started blogs for Edgartown middle-schoolers. In one case, basketball players deleted a girl's entry when she criticized their coach. In another instance, a teen from a different school posted a comment saying the fifth-graders sounded "stupid" for writing instant-message style, such as "I hope u r very excited."

Such exchanges could explode online, if unsupervised, but MacKenty said he used the episodes to teach. He told the basketball players they should politely discuss the issue, not censor one another. And he said fifth-graders started writing more legibly.

"This is new territory for us, man," MacKenty said. "Fifteen years ago, we didn't know what teenagers were thinking. Now they vent online, and a million people read it."

Some schools block comments or make blogs available to members only to protect students' privacy. Driscoll School, an elementary school in Brookline, blocked comments from its blogs. Brookline High lets teachers restrict access to blogs by using passwords.

Winchester High's librarian Karen Miller warned students on her blog, begun last year, that she would screen all comments. Nobody commented, but she hopes more will weigh in this year -- politely. "I don't want any area where anybody could be disrespected or anything that wouldn't be appropriate for school," she said.

Richardson, the author, urged teachers to do even more with blogs, such as inspiring students to write, critique one another's work, or invite guest speakers to visit the class electronically.

"That's the potential," he said. "You can bring authors. You can bring scientists. This really opens up a way to make distance irrelevant and to bring people who know more than we do about the topics into our classroom. You'd be surprised by how willing people are to do that." ■