

School chief issues alert over bully video game

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Palm Beach County Schools Superintendent Art Johnson this week issued an urgent warning to parents: Be aware of a controversial new video game called *Bully*.

Using a mass-calling system to send a recorded message Monday, Johnson blasted the game as disturbing and dangerous for children, considering the recent fatal school shootings across the nation.

Out last week for Sony's PlayStation 2, *Bully* puts joystick-holders in control of Jimmy Hopkins, 15, as he enters the bully-filled campus of Bullworth Academy and resorts to violence against his abusive classmates.

Long before the game's release, educators, parents and politicians waged a campaign against the \$39 offering from Rockstar Games, the maker of the popular *Grand Theft Auto* series.

On Oct. 13, a Miami-Dade County circuit judge rejected a suit seeking to block the sale of *Bully* to minors. The game is rated "T", for teenagers 13 and older.

Opponents sought at least a mature rating for players 17 and older.

Broward County's public school officials say they do not plan on making any special alerts for parents, but rather will rely on programs to target bullying on campus.

Johnson says *Bully's* setting is a school and provides "negative influences" for students, undermining his administration's prevention programs and strategies to reduce incidents of bullying, harassment and violence.

The game "could be detrimental to the educational, emotional, social development and well-being of your child," the superintendent warned.

A Boca Raton parent and anti-bullying program coordinator, Kim Mazauskas, asked Johnson to deliver the message as the game reached stores; Johnson said he has seen television news reports about *Bully* but not the actual game.

Samantha Davis, 15, a freshman at Boca Raton High, applauded the schools chief's voice mail.

"I've heard this game teaches you how to fight. Kids are playing these games 24-7," Davis said.

"They make the games so real, so I think it makes kids more likely to do something."

Rockstar Games spokesman Rodney Walker said Tuesday the company is delighted by positive responses and reviews nationwide.

"When it comes to the superintendent's specific arguments and methods, school officials are only

accountable to the parents, teachers and students they represent," he said. "But since parents rely on the rating system to choose the video games they buy, we think promoting a strong rating system is one of the most important ways to help parents."

Alyse November, a mother of first- and third-grade students at Banyan Creek Elementary in Delray Beach, says she worries that children could try to copy Jimmy's methods of retaliating, such as using a slingshot and a baseball bat.

"First of all the game is called *Bully*," said the licensed social worker, who created an anti-teasing program called "Different Like Me" at Banyan Creek.

"So it can't be a good thing."

Rockstar refrains from entering the debate, Walker said.

"We can't try to beat these arguments," he said. "Our whole process we believe with *Bully* is we have to let the game speak for itself. We just want them to know that this is just entertainment. Some people like our games; some don't."

Noah Ludwin, 18, a Boca Raton junior, said he didn't see how anyone could think *Bully* could lead to violence.

"People say the same thing about TV," he said.

"It's a game. They're taking it way too seriously."

Derek Jung, 17, a senior, said he likes to play violent video games, but he would never actually bully someone.

"They relieve stress, and I don't have to take my anger out on anyone in real life," he said.

Incidents of bullying in Palm Beach County schools have dropped in recent years thanks to prevention programs, said Mazauskas, who oversees the district's anti-bullying efforts. She doesn't want to see the game reverse that trend.

According to a report last year by the National Center for Education Statistics, 7 percent of students 12 to 18 across the country said they had been bullied, while 29 percent reported that drugs were made available to them on school property, and 9 percent were threatened or injured with a weapon at school.

That's why it's so important to tell parents about the game and block access to kids, said Rochelle Sides, co-director of Bully Police USA, a group that advocates for anti-bullying laws.

"We're not telling people don't buy it, we're telling people our concerns about the game," said Sides, who lives near Austin, Texas.

"It's just in poor taste. It really can do no good."

Staff Writers Scott Travis and Akilah Johnson contributed to this report.