

## **Guidance for Teachers' Use of Social Media and Direct Teacher-to-Student Communication**

**Appropriate boundaries should be in place regarding interactions between teachers and students in the following areas: emailing, texting, cell phone usage, social networking.**

- A. The same standards of professionalism that existed before the digital age continue to apply in these situations. If a practice would have been viewed as inappropriate in a pre-Internet incarnation (such as telephoning directly and socializing with students outside of school), teachers should avoid similar activities online.
- B. Much of the allure of Facebook, My Space and other Social Networking sites is the ability of the users to construct their own self-centered universe. In addition to being appealing as a space users can customize to match their personal preferences, these sites provide users with a feelings of empowerment. These features are just as important to Parents as to Students. Unfortunately, these sites have changed from their original mission of serving only specific age groups (originally college students) to being available to the public at large. Consequently, the needs and behaviors of users can vary widely and may not be an appropriate mix.
- C. Best practice would be to discourage (or prohibit) direct teacher to student e-mail, texting, etc. as there are a number of other means to facilitate effective and efficient electronic communication without the risks posed by direct communication. Other alternatives include:
  - 1. Use of online assignments through online grade book available to all students in class
  - 2. Moodle—a free Course Management Software that allows student/teacher forums, online chat, document sharing. Advantages include:
    - a. Closed to outside users
    - b. Leaves an electronic record accessible by Principal or other supervisory staff.
- D. Direct telephone calls are inappropriate. Many parents would feel uncomfortable having their children chat with teachers or socialize on the telephone. Direct teacher-student communication to convey last minute information can be appropriate only when it is carried on an open and well defined manner. However, if teachers or coaches need to provide last minute information to students, other safer means are available, such as:
  - 1. One way automated phone call systems (as used for snow day announcements)
  - 2. If necessary, call parent's number then ask to speak with or leave a message for the student.
  - 3. Online real-time shared calendars such as Google Apps or School Web site tools
  - 4. Phone "trees"
  - 5. School overhead announcements
- E. A clear, well defined, policy protects everyone involved, students and teachers alike.

**In Charlotte, NC, a teacher who had posted on her Facebook wall that she hated her students was suspended. What guidelines should apply to teachers who are on Facebook or who publish publicly accessible blogs, etc.?**

- A. In a public school, teachers are de facto employees of the community and are held to higher standards, even in their personal lives.
- B. Over the years this has put teachers in a position, whether fair or not, that requires them to display a public appearance and behavior in line with community standards.
- C. Additionally, most teachers are privy to confidential information about their students.
- D. Teachers should avoid any Internet activities that would be seen as inappropriate when conducted in traditional pre-internet means. Most teachers would agree that making personal telephone calls to students each evening or discussing student performance in public as inappropriate. Therefore inappropriate contact with students outside of the school day, revealing any information that could potentially be seen as identifying any individual student or group of students, sharing of confidential information about students and/or parents, etc. on the Internet should be avoided. Their supervisors should caution teachers who engage in such activities. After suitable warnings, most schools would probably not hesitate to take disciplinary action up to and including suspension or dismissal.

**Many faculty and students are “friends” on Facebook pages and similar sites. What is the faculty member’s obligation to act on information that is gleaned from social networking sites?**

- A. The same standards of professionalism that existed before the digital age continue to apply in these situations. If a practice would have been viewed as inappropriate in a pre-Internet incarnation (such as telephoning directly and socializing with students outside of school), teachers should avoid similar activities online.
- B. As far as obligations
  - 1. A teacher with information that child abuse is taking place is required by law to notify the proper authorities.
  - 2. Teachers are wise to avoid involvement in any student-to-student discussions such as
    - a. Name calling
    - b. Taunting
    - c. Flaming
    - d. Petty disputes
    - e. Sexually Suggestive
    - f. Spamming, etc.
  - 3. The exception would be cyber-bullying or threats to health and safety. But even with these they need to get the principal, supervisor, guidance counselor, etc. involved as soon as possible and not act alone.