

SOCIAL MEDIA ADVISORY

The explosion of social media in our society, in particular within the education community, is changing the way we communicate with each other, our students, and our students' families. Countless stories have appeared in the news describing educators engaging in "inappropriate" dialogue about their schools and/or students, or posting pictures or videos of themselves engaged in "inappropriate" behavior. While most teachers use good judgment with these new platforms of communication, it is important to remember that the public tends to hold teachers to a very high standard regarding online conduct because of our role in educating its children.

This document is intended to provide members with practical advice regarding the use of social media and specifically to alert you to problems that invariably develop with the use of social media. This document will focus on the use of Facebook, but the principles described herein can and should be applied to any social media site (including Twitter, Google +, etc.). While common sense is necessary for all of our interactions with students and parents, it is helpful to have some specific guidelines regarding these newer forms of communication.

SMETA strongly recommends that all teachers:

1. **REFUSE friend requests from students and their parents.** You should also be prepared to explain your policy about not "friending" students/parents. Why? Consider the following possibilities and situations:

a) You have **personal information** on your site to which students would otherwise not have access. They may see things about you, your family, or your friends that you prefer they not see. They may also have access to information regarding your friends (and you) that you cannot control (e.g. pictures/status updates that your friends post). To complicate matters, many social media sites are notorious for updating (changing) privacy and other settings without properly notifying or requesting permission from their users.

Moreover, if you do accept friend requests from students and their parents, understand that the information you and your "friends" post is then potentially available to the administration. Do you really want your administrator knowing that you were up late "celebrating" with your friends?

b) You may have **too much access to your students' lives.** What if they complain about one of your colleagues (or you)? What if they say they hate your school? What if they post incriminating photos or information about themselves or others? What if they tease, harass, or bully others? What if they mention items about which you may be **mandated** to report?

c) When you "friend" a student you may create **unintended expectations** on the part of their parents that you will "**monitor**" or "**police**" their child online as if they were in your classroom.

d) You may be seen as **favoring certain students** if you “friend” them but not others. You may also be accused of favoritism if you choose to post on some students’ sites but not on others’.

e) Most social media sites thrive on **quick comments and rapid responses**, which can easily be **taken out of context**. This may create problems for you if someone reads your comments without a full understanding of the context in which you made them.

2. REFUSE friend requests from former students. A former student may have a relative, a friend, or friends at your school or another school in the district. Current students, therefore, may gain unintended access to your profile if they are “friends” with your “friends”. Use something other than social media to correspond with former students under the age of 30. If you ignore this advice and choose to accept friend requests from former students, you will thereafter need to think very carefully about what you post on your profile for the same reasons as outlined above.

3. Do NOT post images of students. This practice may violate the law, offend students and/or parents and may put certain students in danger.

4. Do NOT complain about your job. Though technically not illegal and likely a defensible example of free speech, **the use of social media to express disdain or complain about your colleagues, supervisors, and/or working conditions is NOT a good idea**. Again, **you cannot assume** that a lay reader will possess clear and correct understanding of context and point of view when making judgments about your post(s).

5. Follow copyright laws. While this does not pertain to most posts, commentary, or content, it is in your best interest to clearly identify any **copyrighted** or borrowed/re-posted material with citations and/or links.

6. Protect your privacy. Make sure your **privacy settings are set to the most restrictive setting possible**, so that only people who are your “friends” have access to your information. Routinely check to verify that your expected privacy settings have not changed (as mentioned above, some social media sites may change their privacy settings without informing you).

7. YOU are liable. Remember that **you are legally liable** for anything you may write or present online. You may face legal difficulty if your commentary can be interpreted as immoral, defamatory, harassing, libelous, proprietary, pornographic, etc., or as creating a hostile work environment.

8. Consider your digital legacy. Remember that what you post may be **available forever**.

9. Make NO assumptions regarding privacy. While this may be obvious, you should **NEVER make personal use of your school computer for Facebook or any other social media site. You have NO right of privacy on any school computer or on any district network.**

Regarding professional/school/work-related social media sites:

While the Legislative Council recognizes that there are many ways to use social media as an effective educational tool, we **strongly recommend** that any site you establish for school purposes be carefully monitored and allow **only** class-related material and comments to be posted. We recommend that you vigilantly stay up-to-date with all changes to settings (privacy, etc.) on the social media site. We recommend that communication be as unidirectional (teacher-to-student) as possible, and we recommend that teachers err on the side of caution and privacy at all times.

Above all, maintain good judgment when using social media. Consult with other teachers and/or Association representatives about best practices in the use of these new platforms.