

TITLE: GUIDELINES FOR EDUCATORS USING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Social networks are rapidly growing in popularity and use by all ages in society. The most popular social networks are web-based, commercial, and not purposely designed for educational use. They include sites like Facebook, MySpace, Bebo, and Xanga. For individuals, social networking sites provide tremendous potential opportunities for staying in touch with friends and family.

Other educational networking sites are also growing in use. These sites are usually restricted to only certain users and not available to the general public. These include resources such as Moodle, educational wikis, a professional online communities such as the Classroom 2.0 Ning, or district adoptions of online applications such as Google Apps for Education.

As educators we have a professional image to uphold and how we conduct ourselves online helps determine this image. The Employee Code of Conduct (West Virginia Board of Education Policy 5902) contains certain requirements, including the expectations that employees exhibit professional behavior and that employees demonstrate responsible citizenship by maintaining a high standard of conduct, self-control, and moral/ethical behavior. Social networking behavior that runs afoul of these expectation may result in adverse consequences, including the loss of employment.

As reported by the media, there have been instances of educators demonstrating professional misconduct while engaging in inappropriate dialogue about their schools and/or students or posting pictures and videos of themselves engaged in inappropriate activity. Some educators feel that being online shields them from having their personal lives examined. But increasingly, how educators' online identities are too often public and can cause serious repercussions.

One of the hallmarks of social networks is the ability to "friend" others – creating a group of others that share interests and personal news. The district strongly discourages teachers from accepting invitations to friend students within these social networking sites. When students gain access into a teacher's network of friends and acquaintances and are able to view personal photos, the student-teacher dynamic is altered. Friending students provide more information than one should share in an educational setting. It is important to maintain a professional relationship with students to avoid relationships that could cause bias in the classroom.

For the protection of your professional reputation, the district recommends the following practices:

Friends and friending

- Do not accept students as friends on personal social networking sites. Decline any student-initiated friend requests.
- Do not initiate friendships with students
- Remember that people classified as “friends” have the ability to download and share your information with others.
- If you wish to use networking protocols as a part of the educational process, please work with your administrators and technology staff to identify and use a restricted, school-endorsed networking platforms.

Content

- Do not use commentary deemed to be defamatory, obscene, proprietary, or libelous. Exercise caution with regards to exaggeration, colorful language, guesswork, obscenity, copyrighted materials, legal conclusions, and derogatory remarks or characterizations.
- Weigh whether a particular posting puts your effectiveness as a teacher at risk.
- Post only what you want the world to see. Imagine your students, their parents, your administrator, visiting your site. It is not like posting something to your web site or blog and then realizing that a story or photo should be taken down. On a social networking site, basically once you post something it may be available, even after it is removed from the site.
- Do not discuss students or coworkers or publicly criticize school policies or personnel.
- Do not post images that include students.

Security

- Due to security risks, be cautious when installing the external applications that work with the social networking site. Examples of these sites are calendar programs and games.
- Run updated malware protection to avoid infections of spyware and adware that social networking sites might place on your computer.
- Be careful not to fall for phishing scams that arrive via email or on your wall, providing a link for you to click, leading to a fake login page.

■Visit your profile's security and privacy settings. At a minimum, educators should have all privacy settings set to "only friends". "Friends of friends" and "Networks and Friends" open your content to a large group of unknown people. Your privacy and that of your family may be a risk. People you do not know may be looking at you, your home, your kids, your grandkids, - your lives!

Please stay informed and cautious in the use of all new networking technologies.

Legal Authority:

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