

Professional Boundaries and the Use of Electronic Communication and Social Media

The presence of technology has grown exponentially in our schools and all aspects of our daily lives. Electronic communication and social media have become integral to our personal and professional lives. While the use of technology has changed dramatically over time, the standards of professionalism have not changed. Regardless of the delivery method, all professional interactions must be respectful and courteous, and appropriate boundaries must be maintained. We need to be aware that all digital communication has the potential to be public beyond the intended recipients and creates a permanent record. A careless electronic communication may have unintended, but grave professional consequences.

Some tips:

1. Communication with parents, students and other members of the education community is best done verbally or face to face in a professional and structured manner.
2. Maintain exemplary professional standards when sending email messages to students, parents, colleagues, and administrators and send your messages during appropriate times of the day. Casual, off hand, joking remarks or expressions of support via electronic media are easily misconstrued.
3. Reflect on your electronic postings. Advise friends and family not to post pictures of you on social media sites without first asking for your consent. Pictures of you, chat discussions you initiate or participate in, and email or text messages between you and others create a permanent record.
4. Slow down. Don't press "send" until you evaluate whether or not your postings, texts, emails will be considered professional and appropriate in the education community. And don't press "reply all" if your intent is only for one person to receive the communication.
5. You are not your students' "friend." You are their teacher and must maintain a professionally appropriate relationship.

Here is a list of activities that could result in disciplinary action for a teacher:

- Visiting inappropriate websites (i.e., adult content, racist, pornographic)
- Sending or forwarding offensive jokes and pictures via e-mail
- Online gambling using school board equipment
- Downloading audio, video or text-based materials in violation of copyright laws
- Using board/employer equipment to engage in activities related to a second occupation
- Constant text messaging, instant messaging and/or e-mailing during school time
- Posting pictures of yourself and sharing them over the Net, especially if they are suggestive or inappropriate
- Posting comments about students, parents, fellow colleagues, or administrators online
- Engaging in personal e-mail exchange with students
- Engaging in inappropriate conversations about fellow colleagues through e-mails or social networking sites
- Criticizing principals, superintendents, school trustees or school boards, personally or professionally, online
- Sharing confidential board information through the board e-mail system or a social networking site.

(Compiled from the BCTF workshop Understanding the Professional Relationship: Social Networking-Ethical Conduct Online and Cyber tips for Teachers, Canadian Teachers' Federation)

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