

# Best Practices for Guiding Staff in Use of Social Media

## What is social media?

Social media is defined as any form of online publication or presence that allows end users to engage in multi-directional conversations in or around the content on the website. ([Online Matters](#)) A large percentage of Internet traffic is centered around the use of social media. Social media includes: Facebook, MySpace, Ning, Twitter, Second Life, YouTube, blogs, wikis, social bookmarking, document sharing and email.

## What is the purpose of these best practices?

Businesses are beginning to understand the importance of providing employees with a clear understanding about how they should be appropriately using social media. Schools have been late to develop such understandings for their staff and students. The genesis for this was a Michigan State University course called [New Media Driver's License](#) where I had the opportunity to review a variety of media policies from business. I tried to find similar policies for education but found almost nothing. After reviewing a number of different policies, I've created this document as a starting point. A list of resources is provided at the end of the document. This is created to be edited, updated, and shared. It is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike license.

*Note: districts have an approval process to convert ideas such as those presented in this best practices document, into a district administrative guidelines or policies.*

## Best Practices

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### Be Transparent

How you represent yourself online is an extension of yourself. Do not misrepresent yourself by using someone else's identity or misrepresenting your identity. Be honest about who you are, where you work and what you do.

### Always a School Employee

The lines between public and private, personal and professional are blurred in the digital world. Even when you have a disclaimer or use a different user name, you will always be considered to be a district employee. Whether it is clearly communicated or not, you will be identified as working for and sometimes representing the school in what you do and say online. Always write in the first person and make it clear that you are speaking for yourself and not on behalf of the district.

### Use a Disclaimer

Include a disclaimer on your social media site which says something like this: "The opinions and positions expressed on this site are my own and do not necessarily reflect my school district's positions, strategies, or opinions." This standard disclaimer does not exempt employees from their responsibilities as explained in these guidelines. If asked by media to comment on a school related issue, refer them to the correct department or person in the district or when in doubt, to the principal or superintendent.



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## School Values

Represent the district values. Express ideas and opinions in a respectful manner. All communications should be done in good taste. Build trust and responsibility in your relationships. Do not denigrate or insult others including students, staff, administrators, parents, or other districts. Don't use ethnic slurs, innuendos, obscenity or any other inappropriate content. Even though you are of legal age, consider carefully what you post through comments and photos. There are school districts who have taken disciplinary action on staff that made posts relative to alcohol and sexual activities.

## Build Community/Positively Represent School

Represent the district and the students and parents you serve in the best light. Respect the privacy and the feelings of others. Under no circumstance should offensive comments be made about students or colleagues (including administrators) nor the district in general. Negative comments about people may amount to cyber-bullying and could be deemed a disciplinary offence. Your posts and comments should help build and support the school community. Do not comment on nor forward unsupported information, e.g. rumors. You are responsible for what you post, be certain it is accurate and supports your organization. If you are about to publish something that makes you hesitate, wait a day, review the guidelines and talk to a colleague or supervisor. Once posted you can't take it back.

## Share your Expertise

Write what you know and be accurate. Add value to the discussion. Post something useful. Provide worthwhile information and perspective. A district's most valuable asset is its staff represented by its people and what you publish may reflect on the school. Speak in the first person with your own voice and perspective.

## Respect and Responsible

Employees, parents, and students reflect a diverse set of customs, values and points of view. Be respectful for the opinions of others in your posts or comments. You are responsible for the content you post. Consider the words used to tag content in a social bookmarking site. Consider the avatar you select. Do your tags, descriptions, and your image portray you in a professional manner?

## Own and Correct Mistakes

If you make a mistake, admit the mistake and correct it quickly. Clearly state if you've corrected a previous post. Even though damage may be done, it is best to admit your mistake and correct it. Apologize if appropriate.

## Confidential Information

Online postings and conversations are not private. Do not share confidential information whether it is internal school discussions or specific information about students or other staff. What you post will be seen by others and will be online for a long time. It can be forwarded or shared in just a few clicks. Do not write about colleague or student without their permission.



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## School Logos

Do not use any school logo or image without permission.

## Posting Photos or Movies without Permission

Do not post photos or movies of fellow employees without their permission. Do not use photos or movies taken at school without permission. Do not post photos or movies that contain student without parent consent.

## Responding to Negative Comments and Criticism

How you respond to a negative comments or criticism will say more about you and your character than what you post. If you delete a negative post, it discourages open communications. When publicly criticized or receiving a negative comment, first, stay cool and don't reply in haste. Express your view in a clear, logical way. Don't get personal and if you made a mistake, admit it and move ahead. It is not uncommon for a negative response to be answered by some other person, who supports your view. When in doubt, it's best to ignore a comment and not give it credibility by acknowledging it with a response publicly; perhaps a face-to-face meeting would be more appropriate.

## Response and Post Regularly

Post regularly. Don't post to your blog and then not post for three weeks. Readers won't have a reason to follow you if they can't expect new content regularly. Respond to other's posts. Answer questions; thank people even if it's just a few words. Make it a two way conversation.

## Spell Check and Abbreviations

Blog and wiki posts should be well written. What you post will be online for the world to read. Follow writing conventions including proper grammar, capitalization, and punctuation. Be cautious about using common abbreviations. While your circle of friends may understand what you are saying, you may have readers from across the world who won't understand. When in doubt, define the abbreviation at least once in a post or include a definitions page on your site.

## Copyright and Fair Use

Respect copyright and fair use guidelines. Share what others have said by linking to the source and using embedded content. Be sure to cite your source when quoting. When using a hyperlink confirm that link goes where it should and that the content is appropriate. It is recommended that all online content be licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Share Alike 3.0 United States License](#).

## Personal Information

Be careful about sharing too much personal information. People often share information such as their pet name, their parents and children's names, where they grew up, and more. This information has been used by hackers to guess passwords. If you share that you will be out of town, a criminal may use this to target your home for a burglary. There was a 17 year old girl who posted to her social



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network site that her parents were going to be away for the weekend and she'd be home alone; image if one of her online friends share this information with someone who had bad intentions. Be smart and don't share too much about yourself online.

## Video

YouTube is becoming an increasingly popular place to share personally created movies. You are responsible for all you do, say, and post online including video. Anything you post online should represent you in a professional manner as others will see you as connected to the school district. It disrupts learning to have days of conversation about a teacher created YouTube video with questionable content.

## Staff-Student Relations

Employees are prohibited from establishing personal relationships with students that are unprofessional and thereby inappropriate. Examples of unprofessional relationships include, but are not limited to: employees fraternizing or communicating with students as if employees and students were peers such as writing personal letters or e-mails; "texting" students; calling students on cell phones or allowing students to make personal calls to them unrelated to homework or class work; sending inappropriate pictures to students; discussing or revealing to students personal matters about their private lives or inviting students to do the same (other than professional counseling by a school counselor); and engaging in sexualized dialogue, whether in person, by phone, via the Internet, or in writing. Employees who post information on Facebook, MySpace or similar web sites that include inappropriate personal information such as, but not limited to: provocative photographs, sexually explicit messages, use of alcohol, drugs or anything students are prohibited from doing must understand that if students, parents or other employees obtain access to such information, their case will be investigated by school and district officials and if warranted will be disciplined up to and including termination, depending upon the severity of the offense. Additionally, certified personnel, depending upon the severity of the offense, may have their case forwarded to the appropriate state department for review and possible further sanctions. The Superintendent or designees reserve the right to periodically conduct Internet searches to determine if employees have posted inappropriate materials on-line. If inappropriate use of computers and web sites is discovered, the Superintendent's designees will download the offensive material and promptly bring that misconduct to the attention of the Superintendent.

*Proposed [Barrow County Schools](#), Georgia Schools Board Policy*

## Email

School district requires through acceptable use policies, that all electronic or any other communications by employees to students or parents at any time, from any email system shall be expected to be professional, acceptable in content to any reasonable person, and limited to information that is school-related or is acceptable to both student and parent.

Email between employees and students and parents shall be done through the school provided email application. Email must conform to school email policies.



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## Referenced Sites and Documents

[Karen Montgomery's Social Media Guidelines Links](#)

[Social Media Guidelines for Schools Wiki](#)

[Educators Royal Treatment Blog – Why Have a Social Media Policy Anyway?](#)

[Barrow County Schools](#)

## Business Social Media Policy Examples

[Social Media Policy Examples](#)

[10 Must-Haves for Your Social Media Policy](#)

[3 Great Social Media Policies to Steal From](#)

[Kodak Social Media Tips](#) (fantastic 16 page .pdf)

[Intel Social Media Guidelines](#)

[Social Media Guidelines for ESPN Employees](#)

[CIPR Social Media Guidelines](#)

[IBM Social Computing Guidelines](#)

[Personal use of social networking and other third party websites - BBC](#) (6 page .pdf)

[Social Media Governance Policies](#) – link over 100 different policies

[Analysis of Social Media Policies: Lessons and Best Practices](#)