

Wichita Public Schools Guidelines for the Use of Social Media by Employees

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Overview:

Social media are powerful communication tools that have become integrated into everyday life. They also can have a powerful impact on organizational and professional reputations. Using social media networks present a new set of options for achieving communication and classroom objectives, and the Wichita Public Schools recognizes the value of innovation using new technology tools to enhance the learning experience. Social media networks also have great potential to connect staff, students, parents and community to the important work taking place within our schools. At the same time, the District recognizes its obligation to teach and ensure responsible and safe use of these technologies.

These guidelines address employees’ use of publicly available social media networks including (*but not limited to*) personal Web sites, Blogs (Blogger, WordPress, etc.), Wikis, Social Networks (including Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter), Photo and Video Sharing sites (YouTube, Instagram, Flickr, etc.), online forums and virtual worlds. ***The District takes no position on employees’ decisions to participate in the use of social media networks for personal use on personal time. However, use of these media for personal use during District time or on District equipment is prohibited.***

To help you identify and avoid potential issues and unintended consequences, we have compiled these guidelines that employees are expected to follow (as specified in BOE Policy 1230 – Acceptable Device and Communication Use by Staff, Students, and the District). Educational employees have a responsibility to maintain appropriate employee-student relationships, whether on or off duty, and regardless of the form the relationships take (in school, away from school, online, etc.).

General Rules to Follow:

Be a positive role model and be aware of the image you present. The line between professional and personal relationships is blurred within a social media context. Educational employees have a responsibility to maintain appropriate employee-student relationships, whether on or off duty. ***Inappropriate relationships with students in a virtual environment could expose the employee to disciplinary action or termination.***

Both case law and public expectations hold educational employees to a higher standard of conduct than the general public. ***District employees are strongly advised to avoid friending students or the parents of students on personal social media networks.*** For information on appropriate use of social media networks in an educational environment, see “Posting on Behalf of the District” below.

District personnel might consider a statement such as the one that follows to include on their personal social media site(s): *If you are a student or parent requesting to be my ‘friend’ on Facebook, please do not be surprised or offended if I ignore your request. As an employee, practice discourages me from ‘friending’ students or parents on my personal Facebook page. I would encourage you to ‘like’ our school/classroom/district Facebook page.*

Take personal responsibility and use common sense. You should make sure that your online activities do not interfere with your ability to do your job. The District believes that all employees should understand what it means to be part of a public education institution, and that your professional reputation is reaffirmed daily. The ability to publish things that become cached on social network servers and never go away, and which can be forwarded endlessly – thus becoming public and permanent – should prompt you to think before you hit ‘send.’ Ask yourself, would I want my family to read this on the front page of the newspaper or circulated across the Internet?

Perception can be reality. In online networks, the lines between public and private, personal and professional, are blurred. Simply by identifying yourself as a district employee you are creating perceptions about your expertise and about the District amongst the community, parents, students, the general public, colleagues and elected officials. Be ever mindful that in the minds of our patrons, you *are* a District employee whether on the clock or not. Your professional reputation is influenced daily, and it should be highly valued and protected.

Protect confidential information. Be thoughtful about what you publish, both in your personal as well as your private social networks. Regardless of whether you post as a private individual or district employee, you must make sure you do not disclose confidential information about students, parents or employees as specified in the Federal Educational Right to Privacy Act (FERPA), Health Insurance Provider Protection Act (HIPPA), or other relevant legal guidelines. ***Employees who do share confidential information do so at the risk of disciplinary action or termination.***

Respect the law. When posting, be aware of the copyright and intellectual property rights of others and of the district, as well as the legal consequences for violating those rights. In addition, be mindful of the laws governing defamation, discrimination and harassment.

Be transparent. Your honesty – or dishonesty – will be quickly noticed in the social media environment. If you are posting about your work, use your real name and identify your employment relationship with the District. Be clear about your role if you have a vested interest in something you are discussing. If you participate in social media networks that are not work-related, be sure to state in very clear terms that the views expressed are the employee’s alone and do not represent the views or beliefs of the Wichita Public Schools. However, also be mindful that perception can become reality, and many district patrons may not see the distinction.

Be respectful and keep your cool. Always express ideas and opinions in a respectful manner. Make sure your communications are in good taste, and remember that our communities reflect a diverse set of customs, values and points of view. Be respectful of others’ opinions and don’t pick a fight online with someone who has an adversarial view. If you make an error, be up front about your mistake and correct it quickly. If someone else makes an error in fact, take advantage of the opportunity to correct misinformation and turn a negative into a positive. Finally, do not denigrate or insult others – including other schools or competitors – or comment on legal matters.

Be mindful of your own safety. Make full use of privacy settings available on social media networks. Know how to use moderating tools if available. Be cautious about using check-in programs to indicate the location of your posting. Don’t list your home address or telephone number. Astute criminals can quickly piece together information you provide which opens you up for theft of property or identify, or potential harm to yourself or a child.

Are you adding value? There are millions of words in the English language. The best way to get yours read is to write things that people will value. Communication associated with our District should help fellow educators, parents, students, employees and the community engage in our work to increase student achievement and be fiscally responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars. It should be thought-provoking and build a sense of community. If it helps people improve knowledge or skills, do their jobs, solve problems or understand education better, then it’s adding value.

If you see abuse, you must report it K.S.A. 38-2223, which specifies expectations for the mandatory reporting role of abuse for educators, applies in the social media world as well. If there is a suspicion of abuse or neglect that is witnessed or observed online, and which falls within the scope of K.S.A. 38-2223 and BOE Policy 5117, an employee must follow established protocol for reporting the concern.

In addition, if incidents of cyberbullying or online threats cause suspicion or concern related to students, schools or work activity, employees should report concerns to their principal, the district’s safety services office at 973-2260, or through the anonymous **SpeakUp** tip line (see speakup.usd259.org for more information).

Don't forget your day job. The District respects the rights of employees to use social media networks on their own time using personally owned equipment, and this policy does not intend to infringe upon such use. However, the use of these social media networks for personal use during District time or on District equipment is prohibited.

Social Media Guidelines When Participating on Behalf of the District

- **Ask yourself why.** The first and most important step to take before you establish a social networking site representing your school or district office is to ask yourself several key questions:
 - Why do you want to be engaged in a social media network?
 - What information do you need to share, and is this the most effective platform on which to share the information?
 - ***Do you have the staff capacity to maintain the social media network in a timely fashion?***
 - Who will do the work?

If you feel confident that your answers create a case for the use of social media for district business, then you are ready to move forward.

- **Develop District Facebook sites as PAGES, not profiles (which are for personal use).** Facebook is a powerful tool for engaging stakeholders in conversation about education. However, it must be done in such a way as to make the official page for your school, department or classroom appropriately constructed in order to avoid negative consequences or inappropriate outcomes. Your page should be created to allow comments to be posted after a school/department/classroom story or announcement posting. The page should not be set up to allow original postings to be created.
- **If you create it, you must monitor it.** It is essential that if you determine a social media presence is an important part of your communications and community engagement strategy, you also make the commitment to monitoring comments as they are posted. Any comments that violate laws, contain advertising for non-district events and activities or breach the standards of good taste must be removed from the official school/department/classroom site. In addition, regular monitoring enables the page administrator to respond in a timely manner to questions that are submitted.
- **Social media tools should supplement, not replace, traditional classroom and parent communication tools.** As pervasive as access to electronic devices is amongst students, educators should be mindful that not all students have this form of access. The use of social media tools for educational purposes should *supplement* tools available to all students, not be the exclusive means for providing instruction or facilitating conversation. The same consideration must be given to the fact that all our parents may not have access to these tools either, and that social media sites should not be the exclusive means of parent communication.

- **One Wichita Public Schools voice.** Although each school or department operates its own social media outlet, all District social media accounts are a voice for our district. A central database compiled by Strategic Communications ensures continuity in social media. ***Schools and departments who use social media accounts as part of their communication strategy must provide the names of social media administrators as well as their phone numbers and e-mail addresses to Strategic Communications. Schools and departments must also provide account login information – including username, e-mail and password – in a timely manner.*** This information will be kept strictly confidential and used only for access during emergency situations.

In addition, official school and department social media outlets should be managed by a district employee/administrator, not external/volunteer representatives (i.e. PTA, PTO, booster clubs, etc.).

If you do not yet have a social media site for your school or district office, contact Strategic Communications before establishing that site. If you already have a social media presence, see the expectations in the preceding paragraph.

- **Use common sense – and follow FERPA – when identifying students online and in social media.** Employees must be mindful of FERPA guidelines when identifying students in social media networks, and should use common sense when doing so. If a parent has requested that their student be “opted out” from identification, that opt out extends online. In addition, caution should be taken when identifying students by their full name online, or providing other identifiable information that would jeopardize their personal safety. For examples of appropriate methods for sharing your successes and appropriately identifying students, contact Strategic Communications.
- **Be accurate, and remember that manners matter.** Make sure you have all of the facts before you post. Double-check everything for accuracy; write in complete sentences; and avoid jargon, institutional language and writing in all caps, as the content you post reflects on the District and your school or department. If you are unsure about the appropriateness of material to share on social media, ask first! Link to additional content on your Web site or the District’s Web site. If you do make an error, correct it quickly. Posts typically include timestamps, and users will be able to see how quickly you respond.
- **Make it easy for people to find you.** Increase exposure for your social media account by using your school or department name in the title and avoiding acronyms. In the section describing your school or department, include a statement that acknowledges your affiliation with the Wichita Public Schools. Capitalize on branding opportunities by using either your school mascot or the district logo as your graphic symbol, not an unrelated cartoon or character symbol or a copyrighted image. This recommendation applies to official district e-mail signatures as well. Promote your social media site addresses, along with your school, department and/or district Web site address, wherever you have the opportunity to cross-promote your communication efforts.

- **Be clear about acceptable and unacceptable activities on District social media networks.**

Be very clear with all those who visit your site what the rules of engagement are. Visitors need to know what is considered unacceptable in terms of comments, and the reasons for which a comment would be removed from a social media network. You don't want to stifle discussion, but it should happen in an appropriate environment. In addition, district employees who manage social media networks on behalf of their school/department must not participate in political activities, campaigns or offer political comments on their district social media site.

Consider adapting the District's Facebook disclaimer:

- *The official Wichita Public Schools Facebook page is created and maintained by the Strategic Communications Division for the purpose of engaging with the community that the Wichita Public Schools serve. Individual schools and programs may have additional pages that are maintained by other individuals. On all pages, it is expected that participants treat each other with respect.*
- *Comments will be deleted that contain vulgar or abusive language; pornography; personal attacks of any kind; offensive terms that target specific ethnic or racial groups or incite violence; election campaigning for a political office or ballot proposition. Comments that violate Facebook's Terms of Use, are spam, clearly "off topic," divulge personal student or staff information, or that promote services or products also will be deleted.*
- *Links to other Internet sites are not endorsed by the Wichita Public Schools and use of any copyrighted materials found on those linked sites must be granted from the sponsor of that site.*
- *The Wichita Public Schools is not responsible for user-generated content and the opinions expressed in that content do not necessarily reflect those of WPS.*

Safety and Privacy Tips for Social Media Networking:

- Did I set my privacy setting to help control who can look at my profile, personal information and photos? You can limit access somewhat but not completely, and you have no control over what someone else may share.
- How much info do I want strangers to know about me. If I give them my cell, how might they use it? With whom will they share it? Not everyone will respect your personal or physical space
- Is the image I'm protecting by my materials and photos the one I want my current and future friends to know me by? What does my profile say to potential colleagues/advisors? Future school/professional interviews? Parents of students? Family? Which doors are you opening and which are you closing?
- What if I change my mind about what I post. For instance, what if I want to remove something I posted as a joke or to make a point? Have I read the social networking site's privacy and catching statements? Removing material from network caches can be difficult. Posted material can remain accessible on the internet until you've completed the prescribed process for removing information from the caching technology of one or multiple search engines.

- Have I asked permission to post someone else’s image or information? Am I infringing on their privacy? Could I be harming someone? Could I be subject to libel suits? Am I violating network use policy or HIPAA privacy rules?
- Does my equipment have spyware and virus protections installed?

Sources:

Sources referenced in the development of these social media guidelines include: *University of Michigan, Ball State University, American Institute of Architects, Via Christi Health, Center for Technology in Government, Colorado State University, Sam Houston State University, United States Air Force, Guilford County Schools, Kodak, Kansas State University, Ohio State University Medical Center, Greteman Group, Minnetonka Public Schools*