

Online? Stay in Bounds at School and at Home

Educators are entitled to enjoy their personal lives outside of school and to express themselves and their opinions in person and online. That said, because educators work with children and young adults and are seen as role models in the community, they are held to high standards for their public behavior and online activities.

At home and in school be mindful of the public nature of your online activities. Your role in the school community goes beyond your duties in the classroom. Here are some helpful hints regarding your electronic activities both on and off the job.

At Home

Social Networking Websites

The opportunity for self-expression on the Internet is endless. Countless websites, including *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *LiveJournal*, provide interactive networks complete with user profiles, photos, blogs, chat rooms, videos, e-mail, bulletin boards, text messaging and even voice telephony (i.e., live talk!).

What you say in cyberspace—about yourself, about your job, about your beliefs, about your activities—is easy for others to find and read. In an increasingly digital world, the line between what is public and what is private, between your professional life and your personal life, is no longer clear.

If you create your own web page or post comments in cyberspace, remember your role as a teacher or school staff member. Yes, you are entitled to have a private life away from school. Still, your off-duty conduct can affect your job security. Anyone can browse your personal web page or your blog. Websites such as *MySpace* cannot guarantee your privacy or your anonymity. Posted comments are public comments. You may intend your posts to be for your own personal community of friends, but you are also speaking, in effect, to everyone in the school community, including administrators, parents and students. Even if you have set your page to “private,” people with access to it can download pictures or comments and forward them to others via e-mail. Stay in bounds!

Instant Messaging

IM is fast, informal, uninhibited and in real time. IM is a relatively new way of communicating, and it has its own emerging rules, grammar and social protocols. It may feel like a breezy way to chat, but you are actually creating a typed text—without an eraser or a delete button.

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Educators should not use instant messaging as a means of communicating with students. IM lacks the safeguards of ordinary communication between teacher and student. The authority you establish by your physical presence, your voice and your visual cues to the student are not present online. The world of IM is *not* a school environment.

If your students know your IM screen name and use the same IM service that you use, they can place you on a “buddy list” and know when you are online. Your IM service provider—such as AOL or MSN—provides information on easy steps you can take to block this.

Blogs, Electronic Bulletin Boards and Websites in General

There are endless places to post your opinions—personal, political, professional—on the Internet. You can create your own blog. You can join listservs, participate in online forums and post messages on electronic bulletin boards. You may be a citizen of the Internet, but you are also always an educator.

Remember: You are speaking publicly when you enter your viewpoints into the digital world. Many employers search the Internet for employee postings. Students can find your statements. On the Internet, the line between your professional world and your private world can be hard to draw. Think before you post!

At School

E-mail

Electronic communication with students and parents is increasingly a part of the teacher’s job. Whether you are e-mailing during the day on the school network or from home after the school day, your e-mail correspondence should remain in bounds: respectful, professional, to the point, clear, unambiguous.

Think Before You Send! E-mail is:

Permanent. Once you send it, it cannot be easily deleted.

Easily duplicated. It can be printed out or forwarded to anyone and everyone.

Not private. On your employer’s network, your e-mail is easily accessed, monitored, and stored.

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Cautionary Notes:

- E-mail communication with students after school should be kept to a minimum and should focus on immediate class-related matters.
- Use your school e-mail address for all classroom-related communications, even if you are sending an e-mail from your home.
- Always think and write like an educator. Use your “teacher’s voice.” Use spell-checking software. Be professional, and be appropriate.
- Think of your e-mail message as if it is on official school stationery. E-mail to students or parents is never a private communication.

Internet

If you have access to the Internet at school, your online activities should always be above reproach and appropriate to your role as an educator. The computer as a pedagogical tool has vast application and potential. By contrast, using the school computer to pursue personal interests may or may not be permitted in your school district. If it is, do so wisely and cautiously.

- Your employer owns the network that you are using to go online. If you use the school district’s server to access the Internet, do not assume that you have an “expectation of privacy” in your online activities. This is true whether you access the server at school using a school computer or access it from home using your personal computer.
- Your school computer and your school district’s server have the capacity to track your Internet activities— your “web tracks” reveal where you have gone and when you went there.
- Most employers have some form of monitoring software in place. Your employer also owns the computer in your classroom and any laptops it may issue. Do not assume you have an expectation of privacy in anything you create off-line and store on your computer’s hard drive.
- Familiarize yourself with your school district’s technology policy (often called an “acceptable use policy”).
- Many issues raised by the use of the school district’s computers are proper subjects of bargaining. Talk to your Association Representative if you have any questions about your own use of the school computers or networks.
- If you feel as though your school employer is asking you to do more and more work online, you should talk to your Association Representative about the impact of online technology upon your workload.