

## **Social Networking Websites**

### SOCIAL NETWORKING POLICY OF THE FALL RIVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

#### **1. Internet AUP still in force**

This policy is adopted in addition to, and not as a substitute for, the School District's Internet Acceptable Use Policy, which governs use of the school district's technological resources.

#### **2. General Concerns**

The Fall River Public Schools recognizes the proliferation and, in some instances, usefulness, of online conversation between teachers and students and/or their parents or guardians. However, due to the nature of social networking sites, there exists a risk, without care and planning, that the lines between one's professional life and personal life will be blurred. Our staff should always be mindful of how they present themselves to the world, online and otherwise. Should an educator "friend" a student on Facebook, subscribe to a student's "twitter" account, regularly engage in email "chat" with a student, exchange text messages with students or engage in other electronic communication, the school district is concerned, and the educator should be concerned, that such activities may undermine the educator's authority to maintain discipline, encourage inappropriate behaviors and compromise the educator's ability to remain truly objective with his or her students.

In addition, any online communication using one's own personal resources, as opposed to school district resources, compromises the teacher's, as well as the school district's, ability to retain public records in accordance with the requirements of the Commonwealth's public records laws. The law requires public employees who send, receive or maintain records in their capacity as public employees, to retain, disclose and dispose of such records in compliance with strict provisions of the public records law. This law applies whether or not the record is in the form of a paper document or an electronic communication. When staff members communicate through school-based resources, such as staff email or school sponsored web pages, such records are retained and archived through the school's information technology department. If, however, a teacher communicates outside of these resources, such information is not retained. The burden falls on the teacher to comply with public records laws when using personal email or social network accounts to communicate with students and/or parents and guardians.

#### **3. Expectations of Staff**

With these concerns in mind, the Fall River Public Schools has instituted this "Social Networking Policy," and announces its expectations for staff members' use of social networks

such as Facebook, Linked-in, Twitter, personal email accounts, text message features of cell phones, use of blogs, and other electronic or technologically based communication systems.

1. Before endeavoring to establish any social networking account, teachers should familiarize themselves with the features of any account they choose to use. For example, Facebook requires account holders to take specific steps to “privatize” the information they place online. You must educate yourself to these features of Facebook or any other social networking site you select. You will be responsible should any information you intended to be “private” becomes “public” due to your own ignorance of the features of the social network you have decided to use or your failure to properly use such features.

2. You must also know that any information you share privately with a recipient could be re-distributed by such recipient, without your knowledge or consent. The same principles you apply to communication that takes place in person should be applied to online conversation: use discretion, and do not place your trust in individuals who have not proven themselves trustworthy. In essence, nothing you post online is ever truly “private.”

3. The school district expects you to keep the line between your professional life and your personal life clearly drawn at all times. There is no reason why this cannot be done, even in light of the proliferation of social networking sites. All that is required is some forethought before using social networking for both your professional and personal life, to be sure that these lines never become blurred. For example, if the district does not maintain a web portal for staff to communicate outside of school hours as necessary with students and families, and an educator wishes to establish a Facebook or personal email account through which he or she will communicate with students, he or she should establish a Facebook identity and email identity that is separate from his/her “personal” Facebook identity or personal email account. He/she should only use his/her educational Facebook account or educational email account to communicate with students and/or parents and guardians on matters directly related to education. The “friends” associated with such educational Facebook account should only be members of the educational community, such as administrators, teachers, students, and parents of such students. It is strongly recommended that teachers will reject friend requests from individuals who do not fit into any of these categories.

4. At all times, and in the use of any form of communications, staff members will always adhere to student privacy rights and the rights of employees to have their personnel and medical information kept confidential. Information that is protected by law from disclosure to third parties will not be communicated online in a way that unreasonably exposes such information to retrieval by those third parties. For example, through an educational Facebook account, a teacher may not post confidential student information on the “wall,” the “information” section, or through any part of that Facebook account that would be accessible to other of the Teacher’s Facebook “friends” associated with that account. If a teacher wishes to communicate privately with a student through the educational Facebook account, such communication shall be conveyed only

through the private email/message feature of Facebook, so that only the student may view the message and respond to it.

5. Teachers are encouraged to communicate with students and parents on educational matters only, and only through school-based resources, such as school-provided email or web portal accounts. Use of one's personal email account or social networking account to discuss school business with students and parents is discouraged. It should be noted that, just because a teacher uses his/her personal email as opposed to a school email account, this does not shield such email from the provisions of the public records law or from discovery in litigation. It only prevents the archiving of such messages through the school district's automatic email archiving system. We again remind teachers that information sent or received by them, even through personal email or social network accounts, that are related to their capacity as a school employee, are still subject to public records retention, exemption and disclosure requirements."

6. If a teacher conveys school related messages to students and parents on his/her private account, he/she should save such email or any communication conveyed through a social networking site, or print and save a paper copy of such email or other online communication, and file it, and regard its privacy, as he/she would any other document concerning that student. The teacher should forward copies of any such emails or online communications to his or her school based email account so that it can be properly retained and archived in compliance with the requirements of the public records law. Any document created or received by a public employee in his or her capacity as such is subject to retention, and perhaps disclosure under the public records law.

7. No matter what medium of communication a teacher selects, he/she should adhere to appropriate teacher/student boundaries. You are a role model, not a student's friend, you are his/her teacher, and you should always conduct yourself in accordance with this understanding.

8. This policy is not intended to infringe upon a teacher's right to speak publicly on matters of public concern, or to communicate with fellow members of their union on workplace issues, so long as such communication adheres to appropriate time, place and manner restrictions and does not interfere with the performance of your job duties. However, when you speak via social networking sites or tools on matters concerning your work, you are speaking as an employee and not as a citizen, restrictions may be placed upon your freedom to express yourself. Those restrictions are intended to preserve student confidentiality, maintain your status as an educator who should command and receive the respect of students, be able to maintain order and discipline in your classroom, and remain objective with respect to your students.

9. Teachers are discouraged from using home telephones, personal cell phones, personal email accounts and personal Facebook accounts to communicate with students. Your communications with students, even if you do not use school resources for such communications, are within the jurisdiction of the school district to monitor as they arise out of your position as an educator. Any conduct, whether online or not, that reflects

poorly upon the school district or consists of inappropriate behavior on the part of a staff member, may expose an employee to discipline up to and including discharge. Even if you are not using a school telephone, computer, classroom or the like to engage in contact with a student that such contact is not outside of the school district's authority to take appropriate disciplinary action. If your behavior is inappropriate, undermines your authority to instruct or maintain control and discipline with students, compromises your objectivity, or harms students, the school district reserves the right to impose discipline for such behavior. A teacher may also face individual liability for inappropriate online communications with students and/or parents and guardians, as well as exposing the district to vicarious liability in certain instances.

At the same time, the district recognizes that, in limited cases, use of cell phone text messages or cell phone calls or emails outside of regular school hours may be reasonably necessary. For example, in connection with school sponsored events for which teachers serve as duly appointed advisors, they may need to convey messages in a timely manner to students and may not have access to school based email accounts, school provided telephones or school based web pages. In such limited circumstances, the district anticipates that teachers will make reasonable use of their cell phones or smart phones to convey time sensitive information on scheduling issues and the like.

10. Teachers may not access their personal email accounts or private Facebook accounts using school district computer resources.

11. If you are communicating as an employee of the district in your online communications, you must be aware that readers will assume you "speak for the school district." Therefore, all of your online communications, when you are actually acting on behalf of the district, or creating the appearance that you are doing so, must be professional at all times and reflect positively on the school district.

12. In the use of your Facebook account or other social networking site, you may not, without express permission from the superintendent of schools, use the school's logo, likeness or any school photographs or other property that belongs to the school.

13. References to "Facebook" are not included to limit application of their policy to use of that program. All online, electronic or computerized means of communication are subject to this policy. Given the rapid pace of technological change it is not possible to identify all proprietary or commonly named or identified means of such communications.