

CLASSIFICATION: All Personnel**ADOPTED: 8/12/20****REVISED:****SUBJECT: Staff and Student Virtual Interactions****PAGE: 1 of 6**

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to provide San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) staff, students, and community members with guidance to support their transition to distance learning. Distance learning may be necessary at times when widespread illness, natural disaster, or other emergency conditions interrupt SDCOE's ability to effectively conduct operations at its schools. However, the introduction of more informal communication channels can blur the lines of professional boundaries. Accordingly, teachers and staff need tools to help guide their actions when conducting a curriculum that is mainly virtual or remote to ensure the safety of all students.

This policy addresses best practices for educators to follow when interacting with students remotely, whether through video, telephone, or other virtual means. Teachers, staff, students, and community members can reference the guidance below, which contains: the do's and don'ts of distance learning, best practices for how to maintain professional teacher-student boundaries, and other guidance that models professional behaviors conducive to creating an effective, safe environment for all students during periods of distance learning.

What is Distance Learning?

According to the California Department of Education, distance learning can include, but is not limited to, any of the following:

1. Instruction in which the student and instructor are in different locations;
2. Instruction through the use of a computer and communications technology;
3. Instruction delivered asynchronously with dedicated check-in time with teachers;
4. Video or audio instruction in which the primary mode of communication is online integration, instructional television, video, telecourse, or other instruction that relies on computer or communications technology; and
5. Instruction utilizing print materials incorporating assignments that are the subject of written or oral feedback.

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Do's and Don'ts of Distance Learning

The following guidance is meant to highlight the distinctions between appropriate and inappropriate methods of communicating with students during distance learning. The electronic communications mentioned herein include, but are not limited to: text messages, emails, social media sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter), and virtual meeting sites (e.g., Google Hangouts, Skype, Zoom). For purposes of this policy, the term "legitimate educational purpose" includes matters or communications related to activities within the scope of the adult's employment duties.

Appropriate:

1. Offer educationally appropriate learning material to students
2. Maintain positive and professional interactions when utilizing synchronous streaming or live video technologies with students
3. Respect the privacy and confidentiality of student information
4. Contact students or parents at reasonable hours through professional, pre-approved electronic communication platforms (e.g., Canvas, work email, or family home phone number)
5. Have age-appropriate conversations and check-ins with students related to their academic or socio-emotional well being
6. Be aware of your surroundings when recording videos or teaching synchronously to make sure nothing inappropriate is in the background (e.g., alcohol, computer tabs, clothing)
7. Follow district protocols to safely use video platforms, such as utilizing "waiting rooms" and passwords to prevent disruption from uninvited participants
8. Any other action or behavior deemed acceptable by SDCOE policy or law

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Inappropriate:

1. Share or assign online resources that are not connected to a legitimate educational purpose
2. Communicate via text or personal social media accounts unless approved and/or absolutely necessary to reach a student
3. Record students without prior notice and consent from their parent/guardian.
4. Exchange private or personal text messages, phone numbers, email addresses, photos, or videos of a personal nature with students
5. Share personal information that would not be willingly or appropriately shared in a normal school setting
6. Post student work or photos online without prior consent from their guardian.
7. Download software for educational use without first a) reviewing the terms and conditions to ensure safety, or b) getting permission from an administrator
8. Meet with a single student synchronously without prior parental permission
9. Any other action or behavior deemed unacceptable by SDCOE policy or law

Best Practices on Maintaining Professional Teacher-Student Boundaries

Employees should set boundaries that support a healthy balance between school life and home life while working remotely. While prioritizing instruction, lesson planning, or other job responsibilities is necessary during work hours, it is equally important to disconnect from work outside of those hours. Unless it is an emergency, teachers should avoid communicating with students or their families outside of their assigned working hours in order to maintain a distinction between their professional and personal time. These communications should be made via established educational platforms.

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Even though the intent of the employee may be professional and there may be a legitimate education purpose for the conduct, the following online activities can create either the appearance of impropriety or be viewed as blatant misconduct. Below is a non-exhaustive list of inappropriate electronic communications to avoid:

- Texting or emailing a student intimate, personal information
- Inviting individual students to meet privately without a valid educational reason
- Being on a virtual meeting platform alone with a student out of view or awareness of others
- Sharing personal email addresses or other social media contact information
- Criticizing a student, parent, fellow teacher, or administrator over social media
- Using informal or unprofessional language when interacting with students
- Sending graphic sexual materials electronically, including using school equipment to download, view, or access pornography

Whenever possible, employees should avoid these situations. Employees should not maintain personal contact with a student without including the parent/guardian and/or school principal unless the act is justified by an emergency situation. If unavoidable, these activities should be pre-approved by the appropriate administrator. If not pre-approved, the employee must report the occurrence to the appropriate administrator within 48 hours, or as soon as possible thereafter.

Mandated Reporting

Remember that even during distance learning, school teachers, staff, administrators, and volunteers are mandated reporters. If a teacher notices something that leads him or her to reasonably suspect abuse or neglect, it must be reported by using the Suspected Child Abuse Form or contacting law enforcement.

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An emergency situation or a legitimate educational purpose may justify deviation from the professional boundaries set out in this policy. For example, if a student has been absent from distance learning for a prolonged period of time, and their parents or guardians are unresponsive, a professional text message sent by the teacher to check in may be acceptable. In any case, the employee shall be prepared to articulate the reason for any deviation from the requirements of this policy and must demonstrate that s/he has maintained an appropriate relationship with the student.

There may be circumstances where there is an appropriate pre-existing personal relationship between an employee and a student's family that exists independently of the employee's position with SDCOE (e.g., when their children are friends). This policy is not intended to interfere with such relationships or to limit activities that are normally consistent with such relationships. Employees are strongly encouraged to maintain professional boundaries appropriate to the nature of the activity.

It is understood that adjusting to remote work and learning is difficult, especially during times of a pandemic. This policy is not intended to be punitive, but instead to list out the many ways that educators can support their students during uncertain and unprecedented times. Adults are strongly encouraged to lead by example during the transition to distance learning by maintaining a professional and calm online presence. Finally, be sure to consult the San Diego County Board of Education board policies and collective bargaining agreements, which supersede the guidance expressed herein.

SAN DIEGO COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

**ADMINISTRATIVE
REGULATION NO. 4046**

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Board Policy: 4020.1

Administrative Regulation: 5141.2

Derivation: Adopted 8/12/20.

**Legal Reference: Education Code
44691, 44807, 49001
Penal Code
152.3, 288, 11164-11174.3
California Code of Regulations, Title 5
4650**

Management Resources:

**California Department of Education Curriculum and Instruction Resources:
Distance Learning <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/dl/index.asp>**