

Electronic mail – email -- has become a basic communication tool throughout business and our personal lives with technology available that allows you to correspond from virtually anywhere, at any time. While email can be a very useful and effective means of communication if used appropriately and with good judgment; if used inappropriately it can also expose you and your employer to a damaged reputation, liability, and reduced productivity.

We are in a time of increasing public openness, and face increasingly more issues related to online safety and information security. Legal requirements such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), require us to manage email, as well as all other written correspondence, in specific ways, which sometimes includes providing copies of email to third parties, thereby exposing correspondence that may have been sent assuming there was some degree of privacy.

The following is provided as a guideline to help employees of the Grand Coulee Dam School District meet the legal, moral and ethical obligations associated with professional correspondence and communication when using the district’s email system.

- ***Email is a public record.*** Keep all language professional and cordial. Email that is too casual or harsh is prone to misinterpretation. Email should pass the “elevator test.” If you are in a crowded elevator with colleagues, parents and reporters, what would you say? If you wouldn’t say it aloud in an elevator, don’t write it in an email. All email sent and received is saved and archived and subject to search and public disclosure even if you have deleted it from your mailbox. You also don’t know who else might receive a forwarded copy of your email.
- ***Be specific and succinct.*** Be respectful to the recipient(s) of your email by keeping them brief and to the point. If you need to be lengthy, consider using another format. If sending an email to several people that requires action, be specific about who you expect to take action.
- ***Don’t delay.*** Read and, if necessary, respond in a timely manner to email questions and requests, reducing the need for follow-up emails or phone calls. Avoid using email as a stalling tactic.
- ***Pick up the telephone or talk face-to-face.*** Email is not appropriate or most effective for all communication. Consider other methods of communication and if the content or issue being addressed is not resolved or understood within 2-3 email exchanges, pick up the phone or schedule a face-to-face meeting.
- ***Limit use of reply-all*** for simple email exchanges that really do not require an answer to “All.”
- ***Limit recipients*** to only those needing to know. Don’t become a spammer who sends unnecessary emails, “just in case” someone might want to know.
- ***Deliver good news in writing, bad news in person*** (not via email). Never use email to let off steam. A poorly worded or inflammatory message could make a difficult situation worse. Compose the email but don’t immediately send it; think about it for a day or two.

- ***Vacation or out-of-the-office notices.*** Consider restricting your set up on email vacation, or out-of-the-office, notices to internal user only to prevent tipping off outsiders you are away from home.

- ***Limit Personal Email.*** Personal use of the school district's computing and electronic mail systems must be limited to occasional and infrequent use and only during breaks or after work hours. Use of district email for or in support of politically related activities or candidates for public office; or sending information for personal financial gain is strictly prohibited

- ***Email is not secure or private.*** Email passes through many systems on its way to be delivered to the recipient and it could be unknowingly captured and used for unintended purposes. Also, you don't know to whom the recipient may forward your email. The security of the email should be considered when sending information that may be subject to HIPAA or FERPA regulations. Unless secured using an encryption key all email is subject to potential misuse by unintended parties.

- ***Special caution regarding student information.*** Regulations require that special care be taken to protect student privacy when emailing student specific information including health, discipline or any other information that must remain private between the school system, student and family.

- ***Record retention rules apply.*** Email messages should be treated as formal business documents. Most district correspondence, including email, is subject to Public Records Requests and court ordered disclosure. Requests are received on a regular basis from news/media organizations. Most records can be used in legal proceedings for or against the district and its employees.

- ***Wireless web access.*** Security concerns abound in the wireless environment. When you are using wireless Internet, unless you are using a VPN, anyone else with a laptop and a piece of readily available free software can read your email along with you.

- ***Email can be unsafe.*** Great care must be taken before opening and responding to any email received from unknown senders. It could contain SPAM, a computer virus, or a phishing, where thieves pose as real businesses and con people into giving personal information (social security and credit card numbers), or spyware that gets loaded on your PC and tracks your activities while slowing down your computer.