

A USER'S GUIDE TO BLOGGING AND SOCIAL NETWORKING

In light of the dramatic changes with respect to social computing, more and more school board employees are choosing to create or participate in a blog, wiki, online social network, or other forms of online publishing or discussion. These emerging online collaborative platforms are fundamentally changing the way school employees work and engage with each other, and engage with members of the school community, friends and others.

A major objective of public education is to provide students with the opportunity to realize their potential and develop into highly skilled, knowledgeable, caring citizens who contribute to society. In achieving this goal, schools are inherently a marketplace of ideas. As an organization based on continuous learning and enhanced student achievement, schools recognize the importance of open exchange and learning between school administrators, teachers, students, parents and the world at large.

The rapidly growing phenomenon of user-generated web content, blogging, social web-applications and networking is an important new arena for this type of engagement and learning. Online social networking includes existing and emerging networking sites such as *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *MySpace*, *MSN* and *Twitter*.

School boards respect the legal rights of their employees to create or participate in a blog, wiki or online social network. In general, what employees do on their own time is their affair. However, activities in and outside of work that affects their school board job performance, the performance of others and/or the rights and privacy of others are the proper focus of school board policy.

The *Provincial Code of Conduct*, which was released by the Ministry of Education on October 4, 2007, sets out clear provincial standards of behaviour that apply not only to students, but to all individuals involved in the publicly-funded school system. This includes teachers and other staff members, whether they are on school

property, at school-related events or activities, or in other circumstances that could have an impact on the school climate.

As part of the *Provincial Code of Conduct*, all members of the school community must:

- respect differences in people, their ideas and opinions;
- treat one another with dignity and respect at all times, and especially when there is a disagreement;
- respect and treat others fairly, regardless of: race, ancestry, place of origin, ethnic origin, citizenship, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age or disability; and
- respect the rights of others.

The *Provincial Code of Conduct* also provides that all members of the school community must not engage in bullying behaviours or engage in hate propaganda and other forms of behaviour motivated by hate or bias.

In this regard, we recommend the responsible involvement and participation of school board employees with respect to networking and social web-based applications.

With respect to responsible use of blogging and online social networking, we suggest the following guidelines:

1. School staff should not use social networking sites as a means to communicate with students. It is inappropriate to have students as *friends* on these sites and any invitations from students to join a social network site should be declined. All communication with current students should be through the usual communication vehicles available through the school (i.e. email, regular mail and course software).
2. In using social networking sites, school staff should be encouraged to make sure their privacy settings for both content and photos are set. Staff members should carefully screen who can post on their site.

3. All inappropriate references to the school or school personnel, students, parents or any other member of the school community, in computer-related mediums, such as social networking sites, blogging, web pages or email, represents a contravention of board policy.

4. Know and follow the school board's appropriate use of technology policy. The same principles and guidelines that apply for staff regarding the appropriate use of technology will apply to the activities of school staff and members online, including blogs, websites, wikis, user-generated video and audio, and social networks.

5. School staff members, who have a personal blog or website, which indicates that they work at the school, should discuss any potential conflicts of interest with the principal or appropriate school administrator. Similarly, staff members who want to start blogging and wish to say that they work at the school should discuss any potential conflicts of interest with the principal or appropriate administrator.

6. Personal blogs and websites should not reveal confidential information about the school, or personal information about its staff, students, parents or other members of the school community. This might include student or staff information, photographs or videos of students or staff, curricular information, financial information, school plans and school development information. Confidential school information should not be placed on a personal blog without the express consent of the principal or appropriate administrator.

7. Personal blogs and websites should not be used to attack, threaten or abuse colleagues. Staff members should respect the privacy and the feelings of others.

8. Staff members should ensure that their blogging activity does not interfere with their work commitment.

9. Staff members should be reminded that what they post on their blog or online social networking site, speaks to their character and reputation. Material posted will remain in cyberspace for years and can be viewed by anyone around the world.

10. Staff members should show proper respect for the laws governing copyright and fair use of copyrighted material owned by others. It is generally good blogging practice to link to others' work.

Online social networking, blogs and other forms of social discourse are primarily a form of communication among individuals. When the school board or school wishes to communicate publicly, whether to the school community or to the general public, it has well-established means to do so. School board employees should recognize that only those officially designated by the school board or school have the authority to speak on behalf of these organizations.

School boards across Canada are exploring how technology and social computing can empower school board employees as both innovators and global citizens. These emerging online platforms are fundamentally changing the way school employees engage with each other and the world at large. The objective is to achieve responsible involvement and participation with respect to networking and social-based applications. The challenge for school boards involves balancing an employee's right to freedom of expression with the need to ensure a respectful and positive learning and teaching environment.