



Michael Salvatori, OCT, PhD
Registrar and Chief Executive Officer
Ontario College of Teachers

In the Realm of Social Media **CARE & INTEGRITY** are the Watchwords

In April, the Ontario College of Teachers issued a professional advisory on the use of electronic communication and social media, resulting in much media fanfare. Frankly, the attention surprised us. The technology, although always changing, is not particularly new. We were simply providing guidance to our members about its responsible use. Some school boards already have policies governing the appropriate use of electronic communication. Then again, some do not. The College scanned the horizon, surveyed members, saw a need for clarity and sought to fill it.

It is our role as a professional regulator to provide advice to members on emerging issues or in response to member questions on aspects of teaching that will continue to advance the profession and the public's confidence in it. We are not out to police members' use of electronic communication and social media. However, it is our duty to remind our members that they are professionals all the time.

Teachers and school and system administrators are frequent and knowledgeable users of social media, often spending hours each week at work, at home and in the community using computers, Smart Boards, laptops and hand-held devices. They are surfing, reading, researching. They use electronic media as much as a professional tool as they do for personal communication.

The advisory draws attention to the inherent vulnerability in using social media and electronic communication. Use caution, we said. Protect your privacy. Protect your professional identity and reputation. Know the risks in using social media. Act professionally at all times. Ask how does my online presence reflect my professionalism or reflect on the teaching profession?

But when you take a stand on something, you can expect to be challenged, questioned and asked to explain further. Not surprisingly, principals themselves were among the first to raise questions about the advisory. They wanted to know how they would be affected. Were their situations unique? Did they have to *defriend* students? Did they have special concerns that meant veering from the advice on occasion?

Good questions. Honest questions. Deserving of answers.

In issuing the advice, the College expected that members of the profession would exercise their professional judgment in all situations and reflect on each situation and the ways the advisory might inform their practice.

We acknowledge that there will be unique situations encountered by principals in which they may not follow the advice. In fact, our very first advisory on professional misconduct related to sexual abuse and sexual misconduct acknowledges that there are situations in which a member may not follow the advice regarding not being alone with students or driving them in their own vehicles

because there is an emergency situation in which student safety is the primary concern. These situations are exceptional, but they do occur and require us to reflect and use our professional judgment.

With respect to electronic communication and social media, principals can and do give their board-issued cell phone numbers to students in special circumstances. If a student is in danger or has information about a fight that is scheduled to take place, principals want to know and should know. The circumstances in which the student may text the principal are clear and understood. The intent is to safeguard students and staff.

This is different from the private texting context referred to in the advisory in which private, personal conversations occur, which can lead to situations in which the member's intentions may be misconstrued and in which the member's professional reputation may be impugned.

For example, the College advises members to *decline* friend requests from students on social media sites and to refrain from issuing similar requests to students. It follows that they should also take steps immediately to remove students from their own lists of friends on social networking sites. It is not stated in the advisory, but is understood. It is best to use employer-sanctioned sites and email to communicate.

Principals wanted to know what an appropriate time to communicate with students is. We suggest thinking of it the same way you would a phone call. It is unlikely, for example, that you would call the home of a student at 11 p.m. We advocate using the same judgment with respect to electronic communication.

Care and integrity are the watchwords. Care for students and their welfare is paramount, and, as professionals with integrity, principals make decisions using their professional judgment and all available resources designed to assist them. The advisory is one such resource.

The world changes rapidly and advances outside the classroom often have a tremendous bearing on what happens within the school. E-communication and social media present new, inventive opportunities for teaching and learning and we fully support their exploration when used in that context.

We are all digital citizens. It is our job to model the behaviours we expect to see online from our staff and students. Short forms and emoticons aside, the tenor of our online communications should be no different than they would be in a classroom or in the community.

The advisory provides sound counsel to all College members equally. It is intended to protect the public interest with respect to student safety and welfare and to protect members and their professional images and reputations, which in turn inspires public confidence.

See the *Professional Advisory on the Use of Electronic Communication and Social Media* at www.oct.ca.