

The challenge of social media and schools

Introduction

Social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) has had widespread impact on the way in which we communicate and express our thoughts and opinions. There are clearly many benefits for us both as individuals and also as communities, and many of our schools are exploring how they might best harness the power of social media to engage even more closely with parents and pupils.

Unfortunately, we are also experiencing an increasing number of situations where social media has been the vehicle for inappropriate behavior by both pupils and parents.

We live in a society where we are proud of our right to freedom of speech and would not wish to suggest that this should be curtailed in any way. There are occasions however, when things said in the virtual world are at best unhelpful and, at worst, may constitute harassment, bullying or intimidation which could ultimately lead to Police involvement.

Social media and pupil bullying

There have been a growing number of situations where schools have had to deal with pupils and parents using social media to be unkind to others, to teachers and the school as a whole. What starts as something seemingly harmless takes no account of how those on the receiving end might feel nor does it recognize how quickly things can get out of control and become extremely unpleasant. While things are most likely to have taken place off the school site and outside school hours, the resulting 'fallout' in such situations can have major implications for harmonious relationships within school and a resulting negative impact on teaching and learning. If you have concerns that your child might be on the receiving end of hurtful social media posts, or playing a part themselves, please talk to your school in the first instance who will be able to seek additional advice and support as required.

Social media as a forum for parents' views

The staff in our schools work tremendously hard to provide the very best education for our children and always want to work in partnership with parents and the wider community. However, we recognize that there will be occasions where, for whatever reason, parents may not agree with a particular course of action or may have specific concerns.

It is entirely natural to discuss school life and express our thoughts and opinions with others face to face or on the phone. Some of these conversations are now also being aired on social media and the person posting has little control over who might ultimately see it. Sadly, some of these comments and observations could cause offence if aired in the public domain, and may in some cases be intimidating or even slanderous.

This is not to suggest that teachers and administrators are above criticism or do not welcome feedback. However, it is always best when this is constructive and reasonable and is focused on finding an acceptable solution. When difficult things need to be said, it is usually best to do so face-to-face, or at least in some form of private communication, such as an e-mail or letter.

Some recent examples of ill-considered use of social media have caused school staff to spend a disproportionate amount of time trying to manage issues and situations. We would much prefer if this time could be focused on our children's education.

Common questions

If the site I post comments on is 'private' then why should I worry what I say, as only my 'friends' can read it?

Once a comment has been posted there is nothing to stop other users forwarding or sharing it. What started as an initial 'sounding off' can quickly spread much more widely and cause a lot of unintended hurt. When posting on grade level group pages, your comments can be hurtful, slanderous and intimidating and therefore make others in the group very uncomfortable. Remember the purpose of the page and to use it as a positive means of communication not an avenue to express complaints.

How could the Police get involved?

If postings are considered to be threatening or discriminatory then the Police may become involved and have the authority to seize mobile devices and contact service providers.

How can parents help?

- If you are posting on social media and it relates to the school, pupils or other parents, please check your facts, be considerate in the way in which you express things and avoid language that others might consider to be abusive, aggressive or threatening.
- Please do not refer to individual pupils or staff on social media.
- If you have a significant concern about an aspect of school life, please talk to someone at the school before posting on social media.
- If you have a specific complaint, please follow the school's Complaints Policy which is available on the district/school website.

Final thoughts

We have no wish to stifle debate or discourage parents expressing their views, but want to encourage and promote positive role models in both the digital world as well as the real world. While our children may be the more knowledgeable in using modern communication technologies, it is the partnership of schools and parents that can help them to use it wisely, safely and responsibly.

Respectfully,
Troy Holding/Principal