

SECTION V:

Limit social media use in school with ten simple rules to follow

A growing body of evidence suggests that the use of social media can be harmful to the mental health of both adults and children. Some studies have found it to be addictive and stressful, and it can even contribute to jealousy and loneliness. Its use can also allow schools and districts to monitor the private lives of teachers and students, either overtly or surreptitiously.

Despite these warnings, many teachers and schools commonly employ social networks, like Facebook, Instagram (owned by Facebook), YouTube (owned by Google), Twitter, and SnapChat, to communicate with students and their families, to promote school-related clubs and activities, or for instruction.

Schools with official accounts or policies that require teachers to use social media for education-related purposes should reconsider these practices for reasons explained below. We urge teachers to refrain from choosing to communicate with their students or their families through social media or to assign students to use it as part of their lesson plans. Those who do so anyway should take special care to protect their professional reputation and privacy and that of their students. We provide some helpful tips on how to manage this at the end of this section.



Why you should say “No” to school-sanctioned social media

When schools rely on social networks and platforms like Facebook to communicate with families, students and parents may be forced to create accounts to access important updates. Equity issues arise for families with limited access to the internet. Other families may be coerced to use these platforms against their will. Additionally, young students may be unable to access school content on social media networks because most platforms legally prohibit children under the age of 13 from creating accounts without parental approval, in compliance with the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act or COPPA. For more on COPPA, see Section III.

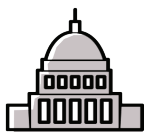
In addition, a student’s photo, name, school, and other personal information is protected by FERPA, the Family Educational Family Rights and Privacy Act. Publicly posting this information on social media without parental consent may violate this law in some circumstances — for example, if a parent has opted-out of directory information disclosure. For more on what FERPA requires, see Section III.

Even if allowed by law, some parents may have their own legitimate concerns about sharing their children’s information online. If the thought of handing a photo of your students to a stranger on the street makes you uncomfortable, then you can understand why you should reconsider posting their photos online.



No educational value

Posting pictures on social media of students engaged in school activities or classroom projects may sound fun and exciting – especially as those “likes” roll in – but children attend school to receive an education, not to promote a school or teacher’s online profile. If you can’t justify the educational value of social media, then don’t use it.



Big Brother is real

School districts are increasingly monitoring students’ social media accounts for signs of depression, isolation, resentment, or bullying, either directly or with the help of third-party services. If students are required or pressured to engage with social media to access information they need for school, they may also be subjected to increased levels of surveillance by school districts, the state, corporations, or law enforcement. For example, some social media monitoring tools employed by police use geofence or virtual fence technology that track and capture any public posts made within a specified geographical area, usually around schools, sporting events, or other areas of interest. Posts can be used to identify and target potential suspects, sparking concerns from civil liberties advocates.

With the rapid rise of big data analytics that include controversial uses of artificial intelligence, machine learning, facial and voice recognition, and social-emotional analysis, students and teachers are at increasingly higher risks of having their behavior tagged with erroneous and damaging labels.

Recent reports revealed that the New York City Police Department maintains a database of “suspected gang members” with more than 42,000 names, including more than 1,300 minors under the age of 18. Among the reasons individuals were placed on this list include staying out late and changes in behavior, as well as the use of video games, SnapChat, or Instagram.

The surveillance of students’ social media use is contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline, according to Community Solutions, a nonprofit organization that specializes in evidence-based programs to prevent excessive disciplinary practices. New laws have been passed in several states that require schools to refer students suspected of cyberbullying to law enforcement.

Survey Results:

Teachers are being tracked through their use of social media as well. In response to our survey, 12 percent of teachers responded that their district monitors their use of social media, with 10 percent reporting this happens even when they are not using the school’s computer system.



Deceptive business practices

YouTube, considered by many to be a social networking site, is increasingly being used in schools to stream lecture content and to deliver tutorial videos. In spring 2018, twenty advocacy groups, including the Parent Coalition for Student Privacy, filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) over YouTube’s deceptive practice of collecting personal information, including geolocation, from children under the age 13 without parental consent, in violation of COPPA. YouTube *claims* that users must be at least 13 years or older to use the site, but as the complaint demonstrates, the platform *actually* contains a great deal of content aimed specifically at young children.

In June 2018, eight consumer advocacy groups filed an FTC complaint against Facebook and Google, describing the manipulative tactics these companies use to trick users into unknowingly giving their consent to allow them to collect and use their personal data for commercial purposes. We must remain vigilant to the deceptive practices of all social media outlets, no matter how fun they may be.

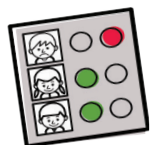


When “free” isn’t free

The manner in which the “free” business model of Facebook, Google, and other social network companies make a profit is to capture as much behavioral and other online information from their users as possible in order to build consumer profiles and then charge companies who want to serve ads based upon these profiles.

Even if a social media platform doesn’t collect user information for these purposes, online advertising companies or “ad tech” does. This means that regardless of the social network’s own policies, advertising companies like DoubleClick (a subsidiary of Google) are capturing data, such as the time spent on a webpage and the links clicked, to serve ads connected to the user’s interests.

Moreover, social networks are known to have long, confusing, and ever-changing Terms of Service and Privacy Policies, describing how their corporate partners, service providers, and other third parties are acquiring and treating user data. It’s difficult, if not impossible, for the average person to wade through these complex documents to know exactly how their online information will be data-mined, shared, or sold by a social network on any given day. Students and their families should not be required to use social media platforms that can share, sell, and use their data for advertising, marketing, or other commercial purposes.



The “creep” factor

Facebook’s CEO Mark Zuckerberg ignited global controversy following his congressional testimony in the spring of 2018 over the social network’s plans to perfect its facial recognition technology. The software analyzes photos and videos of its 2.2 billion users for unique physical characteristics, creates “templates,” and then scans and analyzes every photo uploaded to suggest friends for users to tag. This can pose serious dangers to students’ physical safety, particularly in instances of child custody disputes. Additionally, states such as Texas, Washington, and Illinois have recently passed privacy laws limiting the biometric data that companies like Facebook can collect from its users, including photos. To avoid these risks, it’s best to refrain from posting any pictures of your students to social media, and you should encourage your students not to post pictures of themselves or their classmates either.



Ten tips for teachers using social media for personal use

Teachers should take extra steps to protect their personal data, public image, and professional reputation. If you elect to use social media for personal reasons, make sure you know how to use it safely. Here are ten simple rules to follow:

1. **GET TO KNOW** your school or district policies and state laws on personal social media use.
2. **REGARDLESS** of which social media platform you use, set your account to “private” and select the strongest privacy settings possible. Check the platform’s online help centers to walk you through the process.
3. **DON’T ASSUME** everything you post will remain private, even if you maximize the privacy settings. As recently as June 2018, a Facebook software “bug” publicly exposed the posts of over 14 million users. For any sensitive information you share, you must presume that it may someday become public.
4. **NEVER** include your school name or affiliation on your profile.
5. **DO NOT** “friend” or “follow” students on social media, and be clear with your students not to friend or follow you. As a preventive measure, be sure to block any student who has sent you a friend request on Facebook or SnapChat or who has attempted to follow you on Twitter or Instagram.
6. **BE CAREFUL** when posting any negative comments concerning your school or district. While the First Amendment protects free speech, it becomes complicated when the speech relates to one’s official duties, especially when criticizing your employer. If you do post something critical, consider including a disclaimer noting that your comments reflect your personal opinions and not those of your employer.
7. **NEVER** post any pictures or other identifying information about your students. This may be a violation of FERPA, as mentioned previously. If you choose to post a narrative about your students — positive or negative — it could put you in jeopardy of losing your job or facing other disciplinary actions.
8. **KEEP** your profile pictures free of alcohol, drugs, or anything else that could be interpreted as controversial or offensive. Even if you lock down your Facebook profile for privacy, it can still appear on search engines unless you turn them off. Also, when Instagram users with private profiles share photos or videos to Twitter or Facebook, the image may be visible to users on that platform and publicly accessible to anyone with a direct link.
9. **BE MINDFUL** of what you “like” and “favorite” on social media. Fairly or not, you are likely to be judged accordingly. Even if unintended, your likes may be interpreted as an endorsement.
10. **TO AVOID** public scrutiny, don’t post during the school day, when you are supposed to be at work.