

## General Personnel

### Personal Technology and Social Media: Usage and Conduct <sup>1</sup>

#### Definitions

**Includes** - Means “includes without limitation” or “includes, but is not limited to.”

**Social media** - Media for social interaction, using highly accessible web-based and/or mobile technologies that allow users to share content and/or engage in interactive communication through online communities.<sup>2</sup> This includes, but is not limited to, services such as *Facebook, LinkedIn, X (formerly Twitter), Threads, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Discord, and YouTube.*<sup>3</sup>

**Personal technology** - Any device that is not owned or leased by the District or otherwise authorized for District use and: (1) transmits sounds, images, text, messages, videos, or electronic information, (2) electronically records, plays, or stores information, or (3) accesses the Internet, or private communication or information networks. This includes computers, tablets, smartphones, smartwatches, and other devices.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This policy is optional. Consult the board attorney because personal technology, social media, and public employees’ First Amendment rights involve unprecedented and unsettled areas of the law. In addition, personal technology and social media platforms change continually.

Therefore, instead of prohibiting specific actions, this sample policy focuses on what will not change - maintaining appropriate behavior as outlined in sample policy 5:120, *Employee Ethics; Code of Professional Conduct; and Conflict of Interest*, the Ill. Educators’ Code of Ethics at 23 Ill.Admin.Code §22.20, and 105 ILCS 5/21B-75, amended by P.As. 102-552 and 102-702 (allows suspensions or revocations of licenses, endorsements, or approvals for abuse or neglect of a child, willful or negligent failure to report suspected child abuse or neglect, *sexual misconduct* as defined in 105 ILCS 5/22-85.5(c), *immorality*, and *unprofessional conduct*, among other things). *Immoral* has been defined by one court to mean “shameless conduct showing moral indifference to the opinions of the good and respectable members of the community.” See *Ahmad v. Bd. of Educ. of City of Chicago*, 365 Ill.App.3d 155 (1st Dist. 2006).

Consult the board attorney when a board wants to prohibit more specific actions and/or specific speech, e.g., *friending* students on Facebook or similar social media, *tweeting* or otherwise communicating with students on X (formerly Twitter) or similar social media sites, and text messaging or emailing students. See also the discussion in f/ns 5 & 6 below.

This policy also contains an item on which collective bargaining may be required. Any policy that impacts upon wages, hours, and terms and conditions of employment, is subject to collective bargaining upon request by the employee representative, even if the policy involves an inherent managerial right. When a policy’s subject matter is superseded by a bargaining agreement, the board policy can state, “Please refer to the applicable collective bargaining agreement(s).”

<sup>2</sup> Several definitions of social media exist, and a board may wish to use another definition or create its own with the board attorney. This sample policy’s definition is very broad. It is adapted from Merriam-Webster’s definition at: [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media).

<sup>3</sup> Optional. A board may want to add other sites. As of October 2023, the publication *eBizMBA Inc.* lists the top four social networking sites (worldwide) as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Optional.

## Usage and Conduct <sup>5</sup>

All District employees who use personal technology and/or social media shall: <sup>6</sup>

1. Adhere to the high standards for **Professional and Appropriate Conduct** required by Board policy 5:120, *Employee Ethics; Code of Professional Conduct; and Conflict of Interest*, at all times, regardless of the ever-changing social media and personal technology platforms available. This includes District employees posting images or private information about themselves or others in a manner readily accessible to students and other employees that is inappropriate as defined by Board policies 5:20, *Workplace Harassment Prohibited*; 5:100, *Staff Development Program*; 5:120, *Employee Ethics; Code of Professional Conduct; and Conflict of Interest*; 6:235, *Access to Electronic Networks*; and 7:20, *Harassment of Students Prohibited*; and the Ill. Code of Educator Ethics, 23 Ill.Admin.Code §22.20.
2. Choose a District-provided or supported method whenever possible to communicate with students and their parents/guardians.
3. Not interfere with or disrupt the educational or working environment, or the delivery of education or educational support services.
4. Inform their immediate supervisor if a student initiates inappropriate contact with them via any form of personal technology or social media.
5. Report instances of suspected abuse or neglect discovered through the use of social media or personal technology pursuant to a school employee's obligations under Board policy 5:90, *Abused and Neglected Child Reporting*.
6. Not disclose confidential information, including but not limited to school student records (e.g., student work, photographs of students, names of students, or any other personally identifiable information about students) or personnel records, in compliance with Board policy 5:130,

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<sup>5</sup> Whether to discipline an employee for his or her speech is always highly fact sensitive and should always occur after a consultation with the board attorney. See f/n 1 and 12. The discipline will require careful balancing of the district's obligations to protect its students with employees' rights. Further, a board may not discipline its employees for discussing the terms and conditions of their employment with co-workers and others or otherwise interfere with their employees' efforts to work to improve the terms and conditions of their workplace. 29 U.S.C. § 151 et seq. (Illinois courts have looked to the National Labor Relations Act for guidance on what is protected activity under the Ill. Educational Labor Relations Act, 115 ILCS 5/).

<sup>6</sup> The following list is optional and may contain items on which collective bargaining may be required. See f/n 1. To ensure that the listed expectations match local conditions, boards may want to initiate a conversation with the superintendent about these expectations. Expectations will be most effective when they reflect local conditions and circumstances. This conversation provides an additional opportunity for the board and superintendent to examine all current policies, collective bargaining agreements, and administrative procedures applicable to this subject. See f/n 6 of sample policy 5:120, *Employee Ethics; Code of Professional Conduct; and Conflict of Interest*, for more discussion about how to initiate this conversation, f/n 4 of sample policy 5:100, *Staff Development Program*, and the discussion in f/n 3 and 4 of sample policy 8:10, *Connection with the Community*, related to excluding comments from social media accounts that are considered *public forums* or *limited public forums* and a discussion of some best practices around social media use. Employee conduct issues may be subjects of mandatory collective bargaining, therefore consulting the board attorney should be a part of this process. After discussing these issues, the board may have further expectations and may choose to reflect those expectations here.

*Responsibilities Concerning Internal Information.* For District employees, proper approval may include implied consent under the circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

7. Refrain from using the District's logos without permission and follow Board policy 5:170, *Copyright*, and all District copyright compliance procedures.<sup>8</sup>
8. Use personal technology and social media for personal purposes only during non-work times or hours. Any duty-free use must occur during times and places that the use will not interfere with job duties or otherwise be disruptive to the school environment or its operation.<sup>9</sup>
9. Assume all risks associated with the use of personal technology and social media at school or school-sponsored activities, including students' viewing of inappropriate Internet materials through the District employee's personal technology or social media. The Board expressly disclaims any responsibility for imposing content filters, blocking lists, or monitoring of its employees' personal technology and social media.<sup>10</sup>
10. Be subject to remedial and any other appropriate disciplinary action for violations of this policy ranging from prohibiting the employee from possessing or using any personal technology or social media at school to dismissal and/or indemnification of the District for any losses, costs, or damages, including reasonable attorney fees, incurred by the District relating to, or arising out of, any violation of this policy.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Inherent dangers exist when district employees use personal technology and social media without understanding how the information is used within the chosen platform and what choices are available within the platform to control it. Some examples of laws that require the safekeeping of district and school records include: the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act, 20 U.S.C. §1232g, and the Ill. School Student Records Act, 105 ILCS 10/ (both prohibit the unauthorized disclosure of student school records); 5 ILCS 140/7 (exempts personal information, the disclosure of which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of privacy, and other items such as school security and response plans and maps from disclosure); 45 C.F.R. §164.502 (protects the employees' health information); and 820 ILCS 40/ (governs the release of an employee's disciplinary action). For district employees, implied consent may be sufficient in some circumstances, e.g., teachers taking pictures of each other at a birthday party in the teachers' lounge or at a social event off school grounds and later posting those pictures on social media.

<sup>8</sup> 17 U.S.C. §101 *et seq.*

<sup>9</sup> 105 ILCS 5/24-9; Fair Labor Standards Act, 29 U.S.C. §201 *et seq.* See also f/ns 1 and 5 above.

<sup>10</sup> The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) (47 U.S.C. §254(l)) requires school districts to maintain a policy and provide Internet access that protects against access to websites containing material that is obscene, pornographic, or harmful to minors. See sample policy 6:235, *Access to Electronic Networks*. Because a district cannot subject its employees' usage of personal technology and social media to the same measures required under CIPA (i.e., content filters, blocking lists, or district monitoring of Internet website traffic for patterns of usage that could indicate inappropriate network usage), this statement seeks to balance the district's duty by shifting responsibility for inappropriate behavior to the individual employee.

<sup>11</sup> The Ill. Human Rights Act (IHRA) makes it a civil rights violation to fail to take remedial action, or to fail to take appropriate disciplinary action against any employee, when the district knows that the employee committed or engaged in sexual harassment of a student. 775 ILCS 5/5A-102(B). It is also a civil rights violation under the IHRA to fail to take appropriate corrective action to stop harassment on the basis of a protected category, if the district knows that the employee committed or engaged in harassment. *Id.* at (D), added by P.A. 103-472. Harassment, including sexual harassment, is also prohibited by sample policies 7:20, *Harassment of Students Prohibited*, and 5:20, *Workplace Harassment Prohibited*.

## Superintendent Responsibilities

The Superintendent shall: <sup>12</sup>

1. Inform District employees about this policy during the in-service on educator ethics, teacher-student conduct, and school employee-student conduct required by Board policy 5:120, *Employee Ethics; Code of Professional Conduct; and Conflict of Interest*.
2. Direct Building Principals to annually:
  - a. Provide their building staff with a copy of this policy.
  - b. Inform their building staff about the importance of maintaining high standards in their school relationships.
  - c. Remind their building staff that those who violate this policy will be subject to remedial and any other appropriate disciplinary action up to and including dismissal.
3. Build awareness of this policy with students, parents, and the community.
4. Ensure that neither the District, nor anyone on its behalf, commits an act prohibited by the Right to Privacy in the Workplace Act, 820 ILCS 55/10; i.e., the *Facebook Password Law*. <sup>13</sup>
5. Periodically review this policy and any implementing procedures with District employee representatives and electronic network system administrator(s) and present proposed changes to the Board.

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<sup>12</sup> 105 ILCS 5/10-16.7. The school board directs, through policy, the superintendent in his or her charge of the district's administration. One logical method for a board to address the issue of district employees' use of personal technology and social media is to include its expectations during its in-service trainings required by 105 ILCS 5/10-22.39. Many experts in social media risk management advocate training employees about the expectations concerning social media usage. For boards that do not want to include this as a part of the in-service, delete the phrase "during the in-service on educator ethics, teacher-student conduct, and school employee-student conduct required by Board policy 5:120, *Employee Ethics; Code of Professional Conduct; and Conflict of Interest*."

Public employee First Amendment issues involve the balance between the importance of the speech and the district's interest in maintaining order and effective school operations. The First Amendment "does not entitle primary and secondary teachers, when conducting the education of captive audiences, to cover topics, or advocate viewpoints, that depart from the curriculum adopted by the school system." See *Mayer v. Monroe Cnty. Cmty. Sch. Corp.*, 474 F.3d 477 (7th Cir. 2007). Nor is the First Amendment likely to entitle a teacher to protection for purely personal speech that does not touch on a matter of public concern. See *Pickering v. High Sch. Dist. 205*, 391 U.S. 563 (1968). However, when public employees speak as private citizens on their own time about matters of public concern, they may face only those speech restrictions that are necessary for their employers to operate efficiently and effectively. *Garcetti v. Ceballos*, 547 U.S. 410 (2006).

<sup>13</sup> Right to Privacy in the Workplace Act, 820 ILCS 55/10(b) (also known as the *Facebook Password Law*). The exception for *professional accounts* is unlikely to be available to school districts; see the explanation in f/n 23 in sample policy 5:30, *Hiring Process and Criteria*. The statute specifically permits an employer to: (1) maintain workplace policies governing the use of the employer's electronic equipment, including policies regarding Internet use, social networking site use, and electronic mail use; and (2) monitor usage of the employer's electronic equipment and electronic mail.

The statute does not prohibit an employer from (1) obtaining information about an applicant or an employee that is in the public domain or that is otherwise obtained in compliance with the statute, and (2) requesting or requiring an applicant or employee to share specific content that is reported to the employer to: (a) ensure compliance with laws and regulatory requirements, (b) investigate certain allegations as outlined in the law, and (c) prohibit certain outlined behaviors in the law. Finally, the statute does not apply to other types of personal technology that employees may use to communicate with students or other individuals, such as personal email or text messages on a personal phone. However, employers may access online accounts that the employer pays for or that an employee creates or maintains on behalf of the employer in connection with the employee's employment. Consult the board attorney about these issues.

LEGAL REF.: 105 ILCS 5/21B-75 and 5/21B-80.  
775 ILCS 5/5A-102, Ill. Human Rights Act.  
820 ILCS 55/10, Right to Privacy in the Workplace Act.  
23 Ill.Admin.Code §22.20, Code of Ethics for Ill. Educators.  
Garcetti v. Ceballos, 547 U.S. 410 (2006).  
Pickering v. High School Dist. 205, 391 U.S. 563 (1968).  
Mayer v. Monroe County Community School Corp., 474 F.3d 477 (7th Cir. 2007).

CROSS REF.: 4:165 (Awareness and Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse and Grooming Behaviors), 5:20 (Workplace Harassment Prohibited), 5:30 (Hiring Process and Criteria), 5:100 (Staff Development Program), 5:120 (Employee Ethics; Code of Professional Conduct; and Conflict of Interest), 5:130 (Responsibilities Concerning Internal Information), 5:150 (Personnel Records), 5:170 (Copyright), 5:200 (Terms and Conditions of Employment and Dismissal), 6:235 (Access to Electronic Networks), 7:20 (Harassment of Students Prohibited), 7:340 (Student Records)

APPROVED: