

Social Media Etiquette

As use of blogs, micro blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and cell phone message texting has become more commonplace, it is important for Board members, as elected officials, to make sure there is a clear definition between the school district's and board member's own accounts.

Board members need to keep both communication etiquette and legal restraints in mind when writing in their personal accounts. Remember:

1. The printed word, even if it is written and distributed via the Internet, is 'discoverable', meaning it can be retrieved and used as evidence in lawsuits.
2. Don't assume that you can post any opinion you want citing 'freedom of speech'. More and more headlines are reporting defamation suits filed as the result of those postings.
3. Lawsuits are also being filed against social media users who have not obtained copyright permission prior to posting copyrighted materials (articles and photos). Make sure you have written permission for reproducing information and that you follow a publication's reprint/use guidelines, even if you are using only a small portion of a lengthy article about school improvement or other education-related topic from a publication.
4. Follow district guidelines and state and national privacy laws concerning the release of student information (including use of photos) if you post anything about school district events on a social media outlet. Obtain written permission from parents or guardians prior to posting photos or other identifying information on your personal accounts even if the school district has permission forms on file. Parents may not feel that a Board member's personal account is a place to display their children's information.
5. Don't solicit discussion among fellow Board members on any school district business using social media. While discussion of certain topics may be permitted, err on the side of caution so that you don't find yourself violating legal requirements for open meetings.
6. Even if you are posting to your personal websites, such as Facebook and Twitter accounts, remember that nothing is really personal on the Internet. People have a way of accessing the information, forwarding, copying and pasting and possibly distorting what you have written. Even though you use a personal page 2 account, as long as you are on the school board you are a 'public face' of the district and your comments could be misconstrued as reflecting views of the district.
 - a. Include a statement or disclaimer on your account that the opinions you post are yours as an individual.
 - b. Avoid posting your opinions about school district business or Board actions.
 - c. At a Board meeting, discuss with the district's legal counsel the legalities regarding use of a personal social media account while serving as an elected official.
7. If you have a reason to post information about the district, double check to make sure the information is correct. It is easy to transpose numbers, get a date or time incorrect even on the most well-intentioned post, blog entry, or tweet.
 - a. Once an error is discovered, make the correction and then note the date/time of the correction at the top of the post or blog. If you've sent an incorrect Tweet, send a new one with 'Correction' at the lead.
 - b. To avoid putting incorrect information on your personal blogs, use links to the school district's home page or blog directing readers/followers to get information from the 'official' source.
8. Commenting on school district business while using one's own computer can put you in a precarious position if a public records request is made of all communications concerning a particular topic. Your personal computer and hard drive, and other data memory equipment could be subpoenaed as part of a lawsuit discovery process.
9. Remember that once a thought, idea, claim, or suggestion has been distributed via social media, it takes on a life of its own. Think twice when writing anything. Ask yourself if you would want your comments to appear on the front page of the morning paper or as a lead item on the television news.

10. Don't continue school board discussions or debates using your social media as a vehicle for voicing your dissent or approval of an issue. The Boardroom is the place for discussion and decision, not the Internet.
11. If you want public comment on a particular issue with which the school board is dealing, don't ask readers/followers to comment on your own message boards or comment sections. Instead, tell readers/followers how to contact the district through e-mail or phone calls that will allow comments to be forwarded to all board members. Be sure to include information on deadlines for submitting comments.
12. Refrain from using your personal social media account to inflame or incite a public outcry on a topic that is being discussed by the board.
13. Never post any information gleaned during an executive session, such as that related to personnel, business negotiations, and employee contract negotiations.
14. If you post to other sites and social media outlets - not under your control - make sure those site's topics and photos are considered to be politically correct as well as socially acceptable for readers of all ages.