



Research Brief

Social Media: Developing an Acceptable Use Policy

Question: What should be considered when developing an acceptable use policy for social media?
What are examples of acceptable use policies for use of social media?

In A Nutshell

The growing use of social media by students and staff has led many schools to consider developing acceptable use policies. There is tremendous opportunity for improving education through the use of social media. There is also potential risk because social media can be used to access age inappropriate information and to engage in aggressive online behavior.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that policies about the use of social media be developed collaboratively with teachers and other staff, families, students and administrators. The emphasis should be on appropriate use of social media when communicating and when used in classrooms.

The elements of an acceptable use policy reflect underlying values (i.e., privacy, free speech, intellectual freedom, fair inquiry, student safety). But, these values often conflict. Therefore it is important to talk about those underlying values prior to developing and implementing a policy.

Examples of acceptable use policies and links to guidelines for the use of social media are included in this brief.

Summary:

Students are incredibly comfortable using the Internet and devices that provide ready access to all types of social media. A study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that more than 78% of teens go online daily. Surprisingly the study found that one of the primary reasons youth go online is to complete their schoolwork. A similar study (2010) reported by the Pew Internet Project found that 72% of teens are now text message users, up from 51% in 2006. The typical texter sends and receives 50 texts a day or 1,500 per month. Regular e-mail is considered “too formal” for most teens. Because adults are less familiar with texting and social media, teens find it a useful way to “gain autonomy” and “interact with friends under the radar of parents, teachers and other authority figures” (Choney, 2010).

Many schools, teachers and principals have not yet recognized or responded to the possibilities of the Internet. Students report a “substantial disconnect” between how they use the Internet and how school personnel expect it to be used. Levin and Arafeh (2002) identified the challenges of managing the Internet and the use of social media. They found the following issues:

- Administrators, often at the district level, set policy about use of the Internet and access to social media. This often results in disconnect between the needs of teachers and students and their ability to access online resources.
- There is wide variation in teacher policies about the use of digital technology including the Internet for classroom instruction or for accessing resources to complete assignments.
- Students want to be assigned more engaging instructional activities requiring use of the Internet and other forms of social media. They see social media as a tremendous, untapped tool for improving their educational experience.
- Blocking and filtering software often keeps teachers and students from accessing legitimate educational media.
- Inconsistent access to the Internet and social media outside of school creates issues among students. Those with access at home may have an educational advantage over students without access. At the same time, inconsistent access often limits the type of assignments teachers ask students to complete.



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Teens, Privacy and Reputation Management

Research shows that teens are much more concerned about online privacy than adults. Perhaps that is because adults are far less comfortable using social media and less knowledgeable about its implications. 55% of teens manage their online profiles so that they restrict the information available to others. Of teens with online profiles, 66% say their profile is not visible to everyone. Some 46% of teens say they fake information online so that they can protect themselves from others (Lenhart & Madden, 2007).

Teens and young adults are increasingly aware of the implication of their digital profiles (digital footprint). Because social media sites play a central role in building one's identity and reputation, teens are more attentive about restricting access to information, deleting inappropriate or potentially damaging information, and monitoring their profiles by updating and deleting unwanted information (Madden & Smith, 2010; Irvine, 2010).

An interview with Mary Madden about the increasing concern among teens and young adults about their online reputation is available at <http://www.cbc.ca/spark/2010/05/full-interview-mary-madden-on-reputation-management-and-social-media/>.

Developing an Acceptable Use Policy

Social media, like many things, provides opportunity for schools to improve their curricular and instructional programs, improve communication, and engage families and alumni in school activities. It can also provide a way for students and adults to bully others and engage in online harassment. Further information about both of these topics is available in other Research Briefs.

Innovative Uses of Social Media - <http://www.principalspartnership.com/InnovativeUsesSocialMedia.pdf>
Cyberbullying - <http://www.principalspartnership.com/Cyberbullying.pdf>

When developing an acceptable use policy schools must consider the implications in three areas---legal, policy and educational.

Legal Considerations

When developing any policy it is always important to consider the legal guidance. Schools can clearly regulate access to and use of social media when it occurs on school grounds, during the school day. The problem is that students frequently use social media off campus and outside of school hours.

Principals are limited in what they can do to regulate use of social media when it occurs off campus but it can be regulated if there is a "substantial disruption" to the educational process or to school activities. However, school personnel cannot restrict off campus use just because they don't like what students say, or because they find it offensive.

The following link provides useful information about legal considerations - <http://www.eff.org/issues/bloggers/legal/students>

Policy Considerations

All policies are based on values and beliefs. Policies about the use of social media are no different. For many policies there is tacit agreement about the values they represent. For example, expecting students to manage their behavior and not fight or adopting a sexual harassment policy that prohibits discriminatory action based on gender.

Acceptable use policies for use of social media also reflect values. The dilemma is that there are conflicting values--- student safety, freedom of speech, academic freedom. Some schools restrict all access and prohibit students and



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personnel from having personal social media sites ([Facebook](#), [MySpace](#)). Others value the ease of communication provided by such sites and use social media to communicate with parents and encourage teachers to use social media to share information with students and their families and to improve instruction. More than anything, school personnel must spend time talking about and clarifying their beliefs about the value of social media before they begin to draft a policy.

Educational Considerations

In response to the inappropriate use of social media by students some schools ban the use of social media and block access through the school's servers. In doing so, they also limit the ability of teachers to incorporate social media into the curricular and instructional program.

Many teachers and principals are developing classroom/school blogs, using [You Tube](#) videos in instruction, and embedding hyperlinks to all sorts of instructional media in classroom materials. Prior to developing an acceptable use policy you will want to talk with teachers about how they currently use social media and how they anticipate using it in the future.

Getting Started on Developing a Policy

Several steps for dealing with the use of social media have been identified.

- First, develop a policy with a focus on educationally valuable use of the Internet and social media. Effective policies are supported by curriculum and professional development. Teachers should be expected to have students use the Internet only for high quality, well-planned instructional activities.
- Second, implement a comprehensive program to educate students and their families about online safety and responsible use of social media.
- Third, develop a plan to monitor use of social media and the Internet at school.
- Fourth, have appropriate consequences for inappropriate use of the Internet or social networking sites. Include administrators, school counselors, school psychologists, and school resource officers in developing and monitoring the plan.
- Fifth, engage families in monitoring use of the Internet and social media. Since most use occurs outside of school hours it is critical that parents understand the importance of monitoring their children's online activities and how they should respond when inappropriate use takes place.

MySpace provides a comprehensive resource for school administrators about social media issues. The guide provides useful ideas about dealing with social media even though it comes from MySpace, which has a clear interest in the use of social media. <http://cms.myspacecdn.com/cms/SafetySite/documents/SchoolAdministratorGuide.pdf>

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention prepared recommendations about the use of the Internet and social media and provides the following suggestions for educators to consider when developing policies on its use (www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/YVP/electronic_aggression.htm).

1. **Look at current policy.** Examine current policies to see if they need to be modified to reflect use of the Internet and social media. If no policy currently exists, look at samples from other schools and districts. Examples of acceptable use policies from other schools are included in the online resource section of this brief.
2. **Work collaboratively to develop policies** that protect the rights all of students and employees and meet the needs of the school. Include district personnel, community members, families and students. The policy should also be based on evidence from research on best practices. The CDC recommends the following:
 - Include a strong opening statement on the importance of creating a climate that demonstrates respect, support and caring and that does not tolerate harassment, bullying or other inappropriate use of social media.



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- Be comprehensive and recognize the responsibilities of educators, law enforcement, caregivers, and students in preventing inappropriate use.
 - Focus on increasing positive behaviors and skills such as problem-solving and social competency for students and adults.
 - Emphasize that socially appropriate electronic behaviors will be exemplified by faculty and staff.
 - Clearly identify specific people and organizations responsible for implementing, enforcing, and evaluating the impact of the policy.
 - Explicitly describe codes of electronic conduct for all members of the school community, focusing on acceptable behaviors but also including rules prohibiting unsafe and aggressive behavior.
 - Explain the consequences for breaking rules and provide due process for those identified as breaking the rules.
3. **Explore current educational programs to prevent bullying and youth violence related to social media.** There are several evidence-based programs that deal with both face-to-face aggression and electronic aggression.
 4. **Provide training on social media for educators and administrators.** The training should include the definition, characteristics of victims and perpetrators, school or district policies, information about recent incidents in the school, legal responsibility for monitoring, intervention and investigation, and resources for educators and other caregivers if they have concerns.
 5. **Talk with Teens.** Provide students with an opportunity to discuss their concerns. For example, a writing assignment might be a way for students to discuss using electronic media safely and about the impact and consequences of the inappropriate use of social media.
 6. **Create a positive school atmosphere.** Research shows that students who feel connected with their school, who think teachers care about them and are fair, who think the school rules are clear and fair are less likely to perpetrate any type of violence including electronic aggression or to inappropriately use social media.
 7. **Have a plan in place for what should happen if an incident is brought to the attention of the school.** Rather than waiting for a problem to occur, be proactive and develop a thoughtful plan to address problems and concerns that are brought to your attention. Having a system in place may make students more likely to come forward with concerns and may support appropriate handling of the situation when it arises. Develop techniques for prevention and intervention that do not punish victims. Instead, create an atmosphere that encourages dialogue between educators and students and between families and children about their experience with electronic media.
 8. **Work with Instructional Technology (IT) and support staff.** Work with information technology (IT) staff so that they can create the infrastructure and support necessary for classroom teachers to work effectively. They can help develop strategies to minimize the risks associated with electronic media without limiting the curricular and instructional possibilities.

Sample Social Media Guidelines

An online resource for social media guidelines is <http://socialmediaguidelines.pbworks.com>. PB Works (location of the social media guidelines website) is a free wiki (a form of social media) and the information is part of a public wiki, a site that allows multiple users to add or edit content. The best example of a wiki is [Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/).

The website includes examples of social media guidelines and sample permission forms.

- For District, Staff, Students - <http://socialmediaguidelines.pbworks.com/>
- For Faculty and Staff - <http://socialmediaguidelines.pbworks.com/Faculty-and-Staff-Guidelines>
- For Students - <http://socialmediaguidelines.pbworks.com/Student-Guidelines>
- For Parents - <http://socialmediaguidelines.pbworks.com/Parent-Guidelines>
- Sample Permission Forms - <http://socialmediaguidelines.pbworks.com/Example-Social%20Media%20Permission%20Forms>



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Summary

The increasing use of social media by students and teachers requires that schools have an acceptable use policy. Such policies reflect underlying values about access to information, student discipline, instructional creativity, and community expectations. The most successful policies are developed collaboratively and attend to the needs of students and teachers and at the same time meet the school's needs to provide a safe learning environment for students. Balancing the risks and opportunities of social media is one of the challenges in developing an acceptable use policy.

Online Resources:

Center for Social Media

<http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/>

Code of Practices in Fair Use for Online Video

<http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/fair-use/related-materials/codes/code-best-practices-fair-use-online-video>

CTAP Cybersafety Project: Social Networking/Blogging Policies for Schools (CA)

<http://www.ctap4.net/projects/cybersafety/acceptable-use-policies/social-networking-policies.html>

Digital Disconnect: The widening gap between Internet-savvy students and their schools. (2002)

http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2002/PIP_Schools_Internet_Report.pdf.pdf

District Recommended Social Media Sites – A list of sites a district might recommend for use by students and staff.

<http://socialmediaguidelines.pbworks.com/District-Recommended-Social-Media-Sites>

Guidelines for Staff About Social Media – This publication from the University of Michigan provides useful ideas about how to talk with staff about the use of social media.

<http://www.voices.umich.edu/docs/Social-Media-Guidelines.pdf>

Image-conscious youth rein in social networking – (Irvine, M., 2010)

<http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory?id=10755631>

Is online privacy a generational issue? (West, H., 2010)

<http://www.pewinternet.org/Media-Mentions/2009/Is-Online-Privacy-a-Generational-Issue.aspx>

Just as you thought: More teens are texting – (Choney, S., 2010)

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/36650790>

MySpace School Administrator's Guide to Social Networking Issues

<http://cms.myspacedn.com/cms/SafetySite/documents/SchoolAdministratorGuide.pdf>

Pew Internet and American Life Project – Social Networking Resources

<http://www.pewinternet.org/topics/social-networking.aspx>

Reputation Management and Social Media – (Madden, M. & Smith, A. 2010)

<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Reputation-Management.aspx>



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Social Media Policies Toolkit – This site links you to resources for developing a policy on the use of social media.
http://toolkitcafe.com/social_media_policies.php

Teens, privacy and online social networks. (Lenhart, A. & Madden, M., 2007)
<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2007/Teens-Privacy-and-Online-Social-Networks.aspx>

Policy Templates

Internet Use Policy Template – A sample template where you can “fill in the blanks”
http://www.auditnet.org/docs/internet_acceptable_use_policy_t.htm

http://humanresources.about.com/od/internetpolicysample/Internet_Acceptable_Use_Policy_Internet_Policy_Samples.htm

<http://www.osa.state.ms.us/downloads/iupg.pdf>

Examples of Acceptable Use Policies

Pittsfield, MA
<http://mail.pittsfield.net/technology/hsaup>

Helena, MT
<http://www.hhs.helena.k12.mt.us/aupbrief.html>

Red Bank Regional High School District, NJ
<http://www.redbankregional.k12.nj.us/MainPageFiles/AUPstudent.pdf>

Fraser High School, MI
<http://www.macomb.k12.mi.us/fraser/fhs/information/aup.ht>

Parramatta Marist High School
<http://www.scribd.com/doc/7571227/Acceptable-Use-Policy-for-High-School-IT-Web20>

Nashoba Regional School District, MA
<http://nrhs.nrsd.net/documents/studentAUP.pdf>

Arapahoe High School Blogging Policy, CO
<http://arapahoe.littletonpublicschools.net/forStudents/AHSBloggingPolicy/tabid/1486/Default.aspx>

Laramie County School District #2 Safe Blogging Policy, WY
<http://laramie2.org/modules/groups/homepagefiles/cms/358136/File/Technology/Safe%20Blog%20Guidelines.pdf?sessionId=9f6842643ebe63c3554258d4a1d81ed0>

Maine School Administrative District #22 Policy
<http://www.sad22.us/blogterms>



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Kennett Consolidated School District, PA Policy

http://www.kcsd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=343&Itemid=313#sub-blogging

East Lothian School District Policy

Students - <http://edubuzz.pbworks.com/socialmediapupil>

Staff - <http://edubuzz.pbworks.com/socialmediastaff>

Related Research Briefs

Social Media – <http://www.principalspartnership.com/SocialMedia.pdf>

Cyberbullying - <http://www.principalspartnership.com/Cyberbullying.pdf>

Innovative Uses of Social Media - <http://www.principalspartnership.com/InnovativeUsesSocialMedia.pdf>

Using iPods for Instruction - <http://www.principalspartnership.com/iPods.pdf>

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