

Lake Washington School District Employees and Social Media

Guidance for District Use and Personal Use

Social media have quickly become mainstream media tools in this country. Facebook, for example, is the second most popular website in the United States, behind Google. Part of 21st Century learning is adapting to changing methods of communication. Both parents and students are using Facebook, Twitter and other social media tools in large proportions. These tools have potential for use in communication, building connection and community, and helping students learn.

However, these tools also hold the possibility of a host of unintended consequences. These applications, or “tools,” that allow you to interact with others online require careful consideration to assess the implications of “friending,” “linking,” “following” or accepting such a request from another person. For example, there is the potential for misinterpretation of the relationship or the potential of sharing protected information.

As an employee of Lake Washington School District, you have legal and ethical responsibilities in any use of social media as part of your job. Use of social media in your private life can also affect your work life; following some common sense guidelines may help you avoid any unintended consequences.

This document is intended to provide guidance for school district employees as well as to provide information and awareness on some specific legal requirements. This document is not intended to be all encompassing but to provide basic guidance to staff members. It will be updated as we learn more about the best use of these 21st Century tools. A district research committee has been charged with finding best practices in communicating, teaching and learning using these tools.

District Use: Participation in social media in a professional capacity at work

When participating in social media in a professional capacity, you have professional and legal obligations, including maintaining proper student boundaries. Of course, you should also use common sense and good judgment.

- Using District-approved social media tools. Lake Washington School District provides access to social media tools, currently in the form of our Learning Management System. District-approved tools have many advantages, including security and technical assistance from the Help Desk. They can also help you avoid violating several different laws that govern your use of social media as a public school employee.

These tools are your best choice if your use involves student work or student identities. The district creates a firewall for these tools that protect students and their identities and keeps them safe. It also ensures that student schoolwork, which is protected by Federal law, also is kept private. The district archives all changes to this website, meeting state legal requirements.

- Using outside, third-party social media tools. These tools are very accessible and popular. They are best used for information that is fine to share with the public and in fact can be used to help you reach a wider audience, including parents and the community for example. They can help you include people who are outside of the school, such as volunteers or grandparents. You might use public social media tools to interest students and parents and direct them to websites that are appropriate and protected. For example, you might use Facebook to encourage students to check out something new you have posted on our Learning Management System, where they can post a written response without having it open to the entire Internet.

However, you must read the sections below to use these tools safely: A. Confidential Information, B. Setting up a site that allows comments, C. Whatever you post is public, and D. Mandatory reporting. Also, the district cannot provide technical assistance with these tools, with the exception of archiving.

Remember that parents may not want their student to have a social media account of any kind. If you are using social media for a class, provide an alternative for those who cannot take part.

In addition, the Secretary of State of Washington has ruled that Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and other social media that are used in your professional role as an employee of the school district are a **public record**. Therefore, it must be **archived** according to the state archivist's rules and the whole thing must be archived as it was created, including all the electronic data that goes along with it.

To help you comply with these legal requirements, **here are the steps to using a third-party social media tool as part of your job:**

- Register the social media account you will use in your job with the communications office. Part of that registration form will include getting permission from your supervisor.
- Use the district-provided disclaimer if any comments or posts from others will be allowed.
- Work with the communications department to set up appropriate archiving of your site. (They will set up the archiving system for you but will need some information.)
- Clearly identify yourself and your position with the district.
- Conduct yourself as a professional. Remember that you are acting on behalf of the district in a very public way.
- Read and comply with A. through D. below.

A. Don't post Confidential Information. Do not post confidential or proprietary information about the district, its students, alumni or employees. Federal privacy laws require that we keep student records confidential. Use good ethical judgment for information not covered by federal or state law. Be mindful of what information you share about students. Check with parents first whenever possible. Maintain privacy and do not discuss a situation involving named or pictured individuals without their permission.

With the exception of "directory information," school employees may not release information about a student or their school work. Schools may disclose, without consent, students' directory information such as name and participation in school activities. Parents have the opportunity at the beginning of the school year to file a "Request to Prevent Disclosure of Directory Information" form. If they do so, district employees cannot release any information about the student.

Employees must not disclose ANY information about students with "Do Not Disclose" forms on file; employees should not disclose more than directory information for students without "Do Not Disclose" forms on file. Check with the school office for information on which students have forms on file.

B. Whatever you post is public and may persist online for years. Items can be forwarded, archived, copied, and found via search engines for years to come. As a result, please:

- Spell and grammar check carefully. Parents and citizens expect education employees to write properly. Correct any errors that do occur as soon as you can.
- Think before you post. Don't post when upset or angry. You may later regret what you have written. Wait until you are calm, and then review what you have written again before posting.
- Think about who might read what you have written. What might a parent think about what you are posting? A taxpayer? A neighbor?

C. Be careful when setting up a public site or blog that may allow comments. If you create a public forum that allows others to comment or discuss, that forum is covered by the First Amendment. Bottom line: an employee who creates a job-related forum for public commentary cannot remove or edit any comments because s/he doesn't like or agree with the viewpoint expressed. Instead, think carefully first about whether you do want to allow comments and if so, use the district's posting rules/disclaimer and remove content only if it meets one of the criteria listed. (Contact the communications department for a copy of the posting rules/disclaimer and for more information.)

D. Mandatory reporting applies. All employees need to remember that when any professional school personnel has reasonable cause to believe that a child has suffered abuse or neglect, he or she SHALL report such incident or cause a report to be made to the proper law enforcement agency and to the Department of Social and Health Services within 48 hours. Classified employees should report to an administrator in their school. This law applies whether you learn about the possible abuse or neglect by talking with the student face to face or through a Facebook or Twitter post.

For more information about legal requirements around social media use on the job:

- Secretary of State – Advice: <http://www.sos.wa.gov/assets/archives/RecordsManagement/RMAdviceSheetBlogsTwitter.pdf>.
- Secretary of State – PowerPoint ([PowerPoint on Social Media, posted on the communications portal](#))
- Governor’s office – best practices: <http://www.governor.wa.gov/media/guidelines.pdf>.

Personal Use: participation in social media on your own time

Social media can be a great way to maintain friendships and community ties. It can help you keep in touch with people who are important to you who live far away. The district does not take a position on an individual employee's decision to participate in social media for personal use on personal time – it's entirely up to you.

Recent news stories, though, provide cautionary tales of teachers who have been hurt professionally by their personal use of social media. Below are suggestions and guidelines to follow that can help you make sure social media use does not interfere with your professional life.

Professional code of conduct still applies. Certificated employees are covered by the code of conduct whenever they act within their job capacity. Any interaction with students is within their job capacity. **Any contact with students via text message, email, voicemail, on Twitter, Facebook or a blog is a professional act that will be judged on whether it meets professional standards, even if it is on a personal account, done on personal time, and off school grounds.**

Keep your professional and personal lives separate. Parents and others may view any communication between district employees and students on public social networking sites as inappropriate. Keeping your accounts clearly separated into personal and professional, however, can ensure that what parents and others do see that involves students is all professional. In personal posts, you may identify yourself as a teacher or staff member, however, please be clear that you are sharing your personal views and are not speaking as a representative of the district.

Do not provide your personal email address or personal social networking site(s) to students. All email and contact with students must be done through your district account.

Things to do.

- Be respectful and professional in all communications.
- Remember that any time you identify yourself as a district employee, your words and actions will reflect on the district as well.
- Be clear when you are expressing your opinion that it is your personal opinion and not that of the district.

Things to avoid. Do not blog or otherwise post through personal social media:

- About students. That will help you avoid disclosure of any confidential information and will help keep them safe.
- About your job duties, colleagues, or supervisor, to minimize the possibility of disclosing confidential information, sharing information about a private workplace complaint or otherwise unintentionally engaging in speech that could affect your employment.
- Using any obscene, profane or vulgar language, or engage in communications or conduct that is harassing, threatening, bullying, libelous or defamatory or that encourages any illegal activity or the inappropriate use of alcohol, use of illegal drugs, sexual behavior or sexual harassment.

Even though these posts may not be at all related to your job, these activities may still result in professional and/or personal repercussions.

- Photos of students.
- District or school logos or other district graphics or trademarks without permission.

Things to remember: You are not anonymous. Ever. Tracking tools enable anonymous posts to be traced back to their authors. The names of bloggers, webpage authors and other Internet users can be discovered through litigation. Your identity will be revealed eventually. A teacher on the east coast who let off steam by blogging about her students was found out by parents who were furious about her disrespectful descriptions of students. You don't want to be in her shoes as parents went on national television shows to try to pressure the school board into firing her.

Monitor what others post about you or on your page. If necessary, take steps to remove comments that pose a risk to you or violate district guidelines and policies. Unfortunately, you can't control what others decide to post. If visitors are allowed to post to your blog or web page, monitor postings and remove anything that is inappropriate or even gives the appearance of inappropriate conduct.

Avoid using social media for personal reasons during the work day. Even if you use personal equipment and are on breaks or lunch, such activities will leave time stamps that may be misinterpreted by others.