



# Network Connections

**J**une Talvitie Siple was blowing off steam, frustrated by the “political activity” that was making her work life miserable. To make matters worse, she was sick. Again. So, the high school administrator vented on her Facebook page to what she thought was a small network of her online friends.

The unfortunate ubiquity of these scenarios makes it easy to predict what happened next: Siple resigned after parents discovered her cyber rants, which included calling community members “arrogant” and “snobby” and students “germ bags.”

What’s not so easy to determine is what school districts can do from the outset to prevent sticky, awkward, and at times, illicit activities from occurring in this age of information or, some would say, information overload.

Popular social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have changed the way people communicate and connect, and school districts have been affected, too. Districts all over the country are dealing with teachers who inappropriately contact students using social media; school

Social networking sites are causing school leaders to rewrite policies on staff and student online communication

**Naomi Dillon**

employees who post complaints on their social networking pages that they believe is limited to a friendly audience; and other similar scenarios.

While scads of attention and literature have focused on protecting and guiding student use of these new technologies, the same diligence has not been paid to covering actions by district staff and faculty, many of whom use these tools as regularly as their students do.

A 2009 survey of nearly 1,000 principals, teachers, and school librarians by edWeb.net, a social networking site for educators, found that more than half of principals, 61 percent of teachers, and 71 percent of librarians use some type of social networking site.

Still, as embarrassment after embarrassment has shown, educators need educating on these matters, too.

“It used to be I would write something on the bathroom wall and whoever walked in there would see it. Now I write something on my Facebook wall and anybody can see it,” says Aimee Bissonette, a Minnesota lawyer who wrote *Cyber Law: Maximizing Safety and Minimizing Risk in Classrooms*.

The speed and reach of these tools is what makes social

media both powerful and problematic, says Bissonette, who wrote the guidebook after finding little out there to direct educators.

### Wide open spaces

Part of the challenge is the industry itself.

“Because all of these technologies change so rapidly, no matter what we do, we are really always charting a new course,” says Dave Doty, who is doing exactly that as the superintendent of the year-old Canyons School District, Utah’s first new district in nearly a century.

Though it plans to gather a cross-section of the community to study the issue and develop recommendations, Canyons, like many other districts across the country, does not yet have a formal policy regulating employees and technology use. Still, it has made important decisions about its value in and out of school.

For instance, Twitter, YouTube, or Facebook are not blocked from district computers. In fact, Doty uses Twitter, the district manages a fan page, and every teacher blogs or has a wiki page.

“We’ve already moved down these paths without some policies; but there are some sticky issues,” he says.

Perhaps the most problematic is how much, if any, out-of-school contact can occur between students and teachers. Though rare—a 2007 Associated Press analysis identified more than 2,500 cases of teacher misconduct over a four-year period, amounting to less than 2 percent of the profession over that time—incidents of inappropriate and, ultimately, illegal relationships have put many lawmakers and policy-makers on edge. Cyberspace and cell phones seem to make these clandestine contacts easier.

In March, for instance, Delaware high school teacher Joshua Bowman was charged with multiple sex crimes after allegedly luring a 16-year-old female student he friended on Facebook into a sexual relationship—and attempting to do the same with another 15-year-old female student. More recently, Idaho junior high teacher Michael Brinkerhoff’s online ruse as a 15-year-old boy and subsequent exchange of sexually graphic photos and conversation with a 14-year-old girl were discovered by her parents.

“When we hear about the bad cases, they provoke fear and concern. That’s not bad if it makes you act proactively,” says Bissonette. “But when I see things like in Louisiana, that’s not the response we want.”

Late last year, the Pelican State made headlines after it enacted first-of-its-kind legislation that required school districts to monitor and document all electronic communication that occurs on school-approved systems between staff and students, although scrutiny can extend to personal devices if due cause is found.

“These legislators were well-intended, but it’s going to create a big mess and a whole lot of work,” Bissonette predicts.

That’s what Texas’ McKinney Independent School District discovered last September when it implemented a policy ban-

ning any electronic communication between school employees and students.

After a deluge of complaints from parents, students, and staff, noting that such strict measures would make it impossible to communicate important information outside of school hours, the board revised the policy. It now allows the interaction but emphasizes parental involvement and staff professionalism.

“The decision in the beginning was made in haste. I don’t think all of the valuable uses of these tools were taken into consideration,” says Cody Cunningham, the district’s communications director. “But we’ve seen now that we can hold our staff accountable and, by and large, they are using the tools appropriately.”

Indeed, districts would do well to direct their attention and policies toward regulating actions instead of media, says Ann Flynn, director of education technology programs for the National School Boards Association.

“Defining appropriate student-teacher interactions should be focused on what constitutes inappropriate behavior rather than banning all activity on a particular technology platform,” Flynn says. “Such a broad ban assumes only negative outcomes would result without recognizing the practical realities of reaching students in a space where they spend most of their time.”

But what happens when students aren’t involved at all? Do districts have the authority to pursue and punish employee online activity, especially when it’s off-site and after school hours?

### What’s your digital footprint?

Clearly, images and references to illegal activity like drug use, theft, and child pornography are grounds for discipline and possible prosecution.

Not every case is so clear. Take Florida elementary school teacher Nicole Newland, who was suspended for three days and transferred in the fall of 2009 after posting on her Facebook page that she hated the school’s principal and vice-principal.

Sound fair? You might not think so when you consider that the action runs contrary to the recent ruling in favor of Florida student Katie Evans, who was suspended and removed from Advanced Placement classes after a Facebook page she created to criticize “the worst teacher I’ve ever met,” was discovered when she was a senior at Pembroke Pines Charter High School in 2007.

Three years later, a federal judge agreed that her Internet gripes were protected by the First Amendment, opening up the door for Evans, now a journalism student at the University of Florida, to declare the suspension unconstitutional.

“When it comes to free speech, if something happens on campus, in school, schools have a lot of control,” says Bissonette. “The problem with the Internet and Web 2.0 is that definition of on-campus gets blurred, and the law hasn’t made deciphering these cases any easier, either.”

Want further proof of that blurring? Brownsville Area School District in Pennsylvania offers a cautionary tale: The district had to fork out nearly \$15,000 in compensatory damages as part of a settlement with high school teacher Ginger D'Amico, whom the district suspended after officials were alerted to pictures showing D'Amico posing provocatively next to a male stripper. It was later learned someone else posted the photos, which were taken during a bridal shower hosted in D'Amico's home.

Or look at Ashley Payne, the Georgia high school teacher who made headlines late last year. Payne claims she was forced to resign from the Barrow County School District last August after an anonymous e-mail tipped off school administrators to Payne's Facebook profile, which included photos of her posing with alcohol and referencing a popular bar game called "Bitch Bingo." How that information came to light remains a mystery, as Payne's account was highly secured and did not include any students or parents. Payne's lawsuit is pending.

"That was clearly not inappropriate," says Gary Walker, head of the Educators Ethics Division for the Georgia Professional Standards Commission. "And we declined to investigate. Our code of ethics doesn't prohibit consumption of alcoholic beverages."

Walker, a longtime educator who has worked in nearly every area of the field, including as a lobbyist, has seen it all and has the stories to prove it.

"I get to see a lot of things in my current job, most of which I'm sure was never intended for me to see," chuckles Walker, recounting the teacher who was so eager to land a date that she posted a nude photo of herself over the school's network.

"Clearly that was inappropriate," says Walker, who has investigated more than 20 Internet-related cases in the last year. "Once you put it out in cyberspace, it's there."

That's what he tries to get across to school employees who take his training on how to avoid being a person who adds dumb things to the Web. Much of his advice is no different than what he'd tell them a decade ago.

"As different technology emerges, people find different ways to abuse it," Walker says. "But we emphasize that the educator is a role model seven days a week, whether you like it or not."

Pat Kinsey says that that can be a tough message to get across to a rising young corps of teachers, many of whom seem unaware or unconcerned about the dangers of over-sharing.

"These are the problems any district has when it has young teachers. It's a generational gap," says Kinsey, director of policy services for the South Carolina School Boards Association. "The district feels if you're a teacher, you're representing the school district. As I'm saying that, I know I'm sounding old school, but it's pretty much the first paragraph of our code of conduct."

### Varying approaches

South Carolina updated its recommendations on employee

ethics in 2007, after a string of sexual misconduct cases prompted the association's risk manager to suggest developing policy guidelines and training sessions to help districts.

"We try to impress on boards they need to have these policies in place, and with that some professional development," Kinsey says.

How that looks in each district, however, depends on the town, the region, or the state.

Lincolnway Community High School District 210 in down-state Illinois bans all forms of social media on school grounds. Minnesota's Minnetonka Public Schools doesn't prohibit staff from communicating with students electronically but advises them to maintain professional boundaries.

"We wanted to preserve our cutting edge but make sure teachers weren't getting themselves into a mess," says Janet Swiecichowski, Minnetonka's communications director. "We tried to be proactive and tell staff, 'Think about your reputation, think about the way parents and students will view you.'"

No matter what their take on the issue, both of the above districts are ahead of the curve simply by implementing policies regarding social media and staff conduct.

"There is a lot of discussion right now on this topic, but it's also fair to say, whenever somebody asks for a sample policy, you don't see a lot of people throwing one out," says Janine Murphy, assistant legal counsel for the North Carolina School Boards Association.

Lack of time and resources have prevented the association from drafting a sample one of its own, though lack of guidance also has slowed the process.

"It's harder to draw a line now because so much of what you do becomes public, even if you think it's private," Murphy says. "We haven't felt comfortable enough with what we've seen to send [model policies] out."

In the meantime, districts like Alabama's Trussville City Schools, which broke off from the larger Jefferson County Schools five years ago, will continue to venture into the digital world, cautiously but steadily.

"We had a lot of conversations with the public about 21st century skills and what kids would need to know," says Superintendent Suzanne Freeman. "Kids need to learn how to use the tools, but we also need to use them so we can engage students."

Today, Trussville is doing just that, whether it's using YouTube to illustrate a difficult concept, Facebook to update students on important events, or Skype to talk with expert scientists or children's authors.

"The technology is not going away, so taking the stance that I'm going to block it and lock it isn't the answer," says Shawn Nutting, the district's technology director. "Facebook, e-mail, and cell phones are here, so it's time for public education to have these conversations and deal with it." ■

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