

Wortham Independent School District - Social Networking Guidelines for Staff

Increasingly, educators' online identities and activities are causing serious repercussions. As reported by the media, there have been instances of educators demonstrating professional misconduct while engaging in inappropriate dialogue about their schools and/or students or posting pictures and videos of themselves engaged in inappropriate activity. Some educators feel that being online shields them from having their personal lives examined when, in reality, it invites more scrutiny.

Section 1: What is Social Media?

Social media is defined as a "Social trend in which people use technologies to get the things they need from each other rather than from traditional institutions." (Groundswell) A large percentage of internet traffic is centered on the use of social media; including:

- Facebook
 - Twitter
 - My Space
 - You Tube
 - Ning
 - LinkedIn
- Blogs
 - wikis
 - social bookmarking
 - document sharing
 - email

Section 2: How do I protect myself?

Friending

One of the hallmarks of social networks is the ability to "friend" others – creating a group of others that share interests and personal news. Wortham ISD currently does not restrict "friending" current students or their parents but strongly recommends a healthy dose of common sense and reminds staff of the expectation of professional conduct at all times. When students gain access into a teacher's network of friends and acquaintances and are able to view personal photos, the student-teachers dynamic can be altered. Friending students can provide more information than one should share in an educational setting. It is important to maintain professionalism with students to avoid relationships (or the perception of relationships) that could cause bias in the classroom.

Be aware how you mix professional and personal contacts. On your personal accounts, you can develop a following that includes both personal and work contacts – co-workers, staff of other organizations, students and possibly their parents. That's fine as long as what you share is appropriate for professional contacts, and you are comfortable including them in other parts of your life. If not, please limit who you connect to or what you share with your professional contacts.

Staff-Student Relations

Employees are prohibited from establishing personal relationships with students that are unprofessional and thereby inappropriate. Examples of unprofessional relationships include, but

are not limited to: Employees fraternizing or communicating with students as if employees and students were peers such as writing personal letters or e-mails; “texting” students (for non-academic purposes); calling students on cell phones or allowing students to make personal calls to them unrelated to homework or class activities; sending inappropriate pictures to students; discussion or revealing to students personal matters about their private lives or inviting students to do the same (other than professional counseling by a school counselor); and engaging in sexualized dialogue, whether in person, by phone, via the internet, or in writing. Employees who post information on Facebook, MySpace or similar web sites that include inappropriate personal information such as, but not limited to: Provocative photographs, sexually explicit messages, use of alcohol, drugs or anything students are prohibited from doing must understand that if students, parents or other employees obtain access to such information, their case will be investigated by school and District officials and, if warranted, will be disciplined up to and including termination, depending upon the severity of the offense. Additionally, certified personnel, depending upon the severity of the offense, may have their case forwarded to the appropriate state department for review and possible further sanctions. The superintendent or designees reserve the right to periodically conduct internet searches to determine if employees have posted inappropriate materials on-line. If inappropriate use of computers and web sites is discovered, the Superintendent’s designees will download the offensive material and promptly bring that misconduct to the attention of the Superintendent.

Remember Who/What You Represent

Expect people to see you as a representative of Wortham ISD, especially if you discuss education issues or your work. On online social networks, the lines between public and private, personal and professional are blurred. Just by indentifying yourself as a Wortham ISD employee, you create perceptions about your expertise and about Wortham ISD by staff, students, families, the general public and colleagues. Be sure that all content associated with you is consistent with your work and with Wortham ISD values and professional standards. **Perception is reality.**

How do I Avoid Supervisor Issues?

- Represent the District values. Express ideas and opinions in a respectful manner. All communication should be done in good taste. Build trust and responsibility in your relationships. Do not denigrate or insult others including students, staff, administrators, parents, and/or other Districts. Don’t use ethnic slurs, innuendos, obscenity or any other inappropriate content. Even though you are of legal age, consider carefully what you post through comments and photos. There are school Districts who have taken disciplinary action against staff that made posts relative to alcohol and sexual activities.
- If you disagree with the position that Wortham ISD has reached on an issue, discuss your concerns privately with your colleagues, not publicly. If you’re not sure about Wortham ISD’s position/s, ask or don’t comment.
- Identify yourself and your role at Wortham ISD. If it appears that you are trying to be sneaky, you could damage both your own and Wortham ISD’s credibility.

- No matter how you protest that you are talking on your own behalf, not Wortham ISD, expect people to consider your words as representing the District. In some cases, because of your role, it will not be possible to claim that you do not represent Wortham ISD.
- Keep your professional image in mind even in a social context. If you use social media to connect with any professional contacts -- co-workers, colleagues at other organizations, etc. – always speak professionally about work-related material and people. A comment may feel private and personal, but if it’s visible to your work-related connections, it reflects both you and the District. If you are concerned about how something might be perceived, don’t make the comment or adjust your privacy settings to keep it to a truly personal circle.
- Blog and internet posts should be well written. What you post will be online for the world to read. Follow standard writing conventions including proper grammar, capitalization, and punctuation. Be cautious about using common abbreviations or “chatspeak.” While your circle of friends may understand what you are saying, you may have readers from across the world who won’t. When in doubt, define the abbreviation at least once in a post or include a definitions page on your site.
- If you are contacted by a reporter or member of the media to comment on an issue, do not comment but refer them to the District spokesperson.

Do your tags, descriptions, and your image portray you in a professional manner?

Employees, parents, and students reflect a diverse set of customs, values and points of view. Be respectful of the opinions of others in your posts or comments. You are responsible for the content you post. Consider the words used to tag content in a social bookmarking site. Consider the avatar (or image) you select.

Some general guidelines to remember:

- Wortham ISD currently does not restrict “friending” current students or parents of students.
- Remember that people classified as “friends” have the ability to download and share your information with others.
- Monitor your wall regularly.
- Create friends lists and set different permissions for different lists.
- If you wish to use networking protocols as a part of the educational process, please work with your administrators and technology staff to identify and use restricted, school-endorsed networking platforms.
- Set privacy settings to limit who has access to what. Remember however, keeping everything private doesn’t ensure that a “friend” won’t copy and paste your private stuff elsewhere. At a minimum, educators should have all privacy settings set to “only friends.” People you do not know may be looking at you, your home, your kids, your grandkids, - your lives!

- Check out all the settings to be sure your profile isn't reporting what you are purchasing on other websites.
- Explicitly tell your friends and family that you are maintaining a professional image on your profile.
- Consider using different networks for personal and professional contacts, and set your privacy settings thoughtfully.
- Limit what types of information your friends can see about you through external applications that work with the social networking site they are using.
- Create two profiles, a personal profile and a teacher/professional profile.

Section 3: What Will Get Me in Trouble?

Confidential Information

Online postings and conversations are not private. Do not share confidential information whether it is internal school discussions or specific information about students or other staff. What you post will be seen by others and will be online for a long time. It can be forwarded or shared in just a few clicks. Do not write about colleagues or students without their permission.

School Logos

Do not use any school or District logo or image without permission. To request permission, contact the Superintendent.

Posting Photos or Videos without Permission

YouTube has become a popular place to share personally created videos. You are responsible for all you do, say and post online; including video. Anything you post online should represent you in a professional manner as others will see you as connected to the school District. It disrupts learning to have days of conversation about a teacher created YouTube video with questionable content and could lead to disciplinary action.

Do not post photos or video of staff members without their permission. Do not use photos or videos taken at school without permission. Do not post photos or videos that contain images of students.

Responding to Negative Comments and Criticism

How you respond to comments or criticism will say more about you and your character than what you post. If you delete a negative post, it discourages open communication. When publicly criticized or receiving a negative comment, first, stay cool and don't reply in haste. Express your viewpoint in a clear, logical way. Don't get personal and if you have made a mistake, admit it and move ahead. It is not uncommon for a negative response to be answered by some other person, who supports your point of view. When

in doubt, it is best to ignore a comment and not give it credibility by acknowledging it with a public response; perhaps a face-to-face meeting would be more appropriate. If you find a negative comment about your campus or District, forward it to the appropriate administrator for guidance.

Copyrights and Fair Use

Respect copyright and fair use guidelines. Share what others have said by linking to the source and using embedded content. Be sure to cite your source when quoting. When using a hyperlink confirm the link goes where it should and that the content is appropriate. It is recommended that all online content be licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Share Alike 3.0 United States License.

Some general guidelines to remember:

- Do not use commentary deemed to be defamatory, obscene, proprietary, or libelous. Exercise caution with regards to exaggeration, colorful language, guesswork, obscenity, copyrighted materials, legal conclusions, and derogatory remarks or characterizations.
- Weigh whether a particular posting puts your effectiveness as a teacher at risk.
- Post only what you want the world to see. Imagine your students, their parents or your administrator, visiting your site. It is not like posting something to your website or blog and then realizing a story or photo should be taken down. On a social networking site, basically once you post something it may be available, even after it is removed from the site.
- Do not discuss students or coworkers or publicly criticize school policies or personnel.
- **Do not post images that include students.**

Section 4: References

<http://www.willard.k12.mo.us/co/tech/Document/SocialNetworkBestPractices.pdf>

<http://www.mansfieldisd.org/departments/personnel/pdf/Professional-ParaHandbook.pdf>

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/28430149/Social-Media-Guidelines-for-Schools>

<http://thinkingmachine.pbworks.com/Think-Social-Media-Guidelines>

<http://socialmediaguidelines/pbworks.com>

Kerens Independent School District Social Networking Guidelines for Staff

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