

3.45--Social Networking and Ethics

Technology used appropriately gives faculty new opportunities to engage students. District staff are encouraged to use educational technology, the Internet, and professional/education social networks to raise student achievement and to improve communication with parents and students. Technology and social networking websites also offer staff many ways they can present themselves unprofessionally and/or interact with students inappropriately.

It is the duty of each staff member to appropriately manage all interactions with students, regardless of whether contact or interaction with a student occurs face-to-face or by means of technology, to ensure that the appropriate staff/student relationship is maintained. This includes instances when students initiate contact or behave inappropriately themselves.

Public school employees are, and always have been, held to a high standard of behavior. Staff members are reminded that whether specific sorts of contacts are permitted or not specifically forbidden by policy, they will be held to a high standard of conduct in all their interactions with students. Failure to create, enforce and maintain appropriate professional and interpersonal boundaries with students could adversely affect the District's relationship with the community and jeopardize the employee's employment with the district.

The Arkansas Department of Education *Rules Governing the Code of Ethics for Arkansas Educators* requires District staff to maintain a professional relationship with each student, both in and outside the classroom. The School Board of Directors encourages all staff to read and become familiar with the Rules. Conduct in violation of the *Rules Governing the Code of Ethics for Arkansas Educators*, including, but not limited to conduct relating to the inappropriate use of technology or online resources, may be reported to the Professional License Standards Board (PLSB) and may form the basis for disciplinary action up to and including termination.

Definitions:

Social networking websites are online groups of Internet users allowing communication between multiple individuals. The fundamental purpose of social networking websites is to socialize. Examples include, but are not limited to, Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter.

Professional/education social networks are education oriented websites designed to allow and encourage teachers and students to communicate and collaborate around school subjects and projects. District employees may set up blogs and other professional/education social networking accounts using District resources and following District guidelines to promote communication with students, parents, and the community concerning school-related activities and for the purpose of supplementing classroom instruction. Accessing professional/education social networks during school hours is permitted.

Blogs are a type of networking and can be either social or professional in their orientation. Professional blogs are encouraged and can provide a place for teachers to post homework, keep parents up-to-date, and interact with students concerning school related activities. Social blogs are discouraged to the extent they involve teachers and students in a non-education oriented format.

Staff are reminded that the same relationship, exchange, interaction, information, or behavior that would be unacceptable in a non-technological medium, is unacceptable when done through the use of technology. In fact, due to the vastly increased potential audience digital dissemination presents, extra caution must be exercised by staff to ensure they don't cross the line of acceptability.

Whether permitted or not specifically forbidden by policy, or when expressed in an adult-to-adult, face-to-face context, what in other mediums of expression could remain private opinions, when expressed by staff on a social networking website, have the potential to be disseminated far beyond the speaker's desire or intention. This could undermine the public's perception of the individual's fitness to educate students, thus undermining the teacher's effectiveness. In this way, the expression and publication of such opinions could potentially lead to disciplinary action being taken against the staff member, up to and including termination or nonrenewal of the contract of employment.

Accessing social networking websites for personal use during school hours is prohibited, except during breaks or preparation periods. Staff are discouraged from accessing social networking websites for personal use during their breaks and/or preparation periods because, while this is not prohibited, it may give the public appearance that such access is occurring during instructional time. The posting of any private or confidential school district material on such websites is strictly prohibited.

The following guidelines apply to all individuals posting on social media networks in any capacity.

- A. Think twice before posting. Privacy does not exist in the world of social media. Consider what could happen if a post becomes widely known and how that may reflect both on the poster and the Van Buren School District. Search engines can turn posts years after they are created, and comments can be forwarded or copied. If you would not say it in a classroom or to a member of the media, consider whether you should post it online. One should also give strong consideration before posting images that may be considered inappropriate or distasteful.
- B. Strive for accuracy. Check your facts before posting them on social media. Keep in mind that once you share inaccurate information on a social network, it's available to the public and is not easily corrected.
- C. Be respectful. Understand that content contributed to a social media site could encourage comments or discussion of opposing ideas. Responses should be considered carefully in light of how they would reflect on the poster and/or the Van Buren School District.
- D. Consider your audience and its potential reaction to our content. Be aware that a presence in the social media world is or easily can be made available to the public at large. This includes prospective students, current students, parents, current employer and colleagues, and peers.

Consider this before publishing to ensure the post will not alienate, harm or provoke any of these groups.

- E. If you identify yourself as a Van Buren School District employee, it should be clear that views expressed are not necessarily those of the district. These guidelines apply to individuals posting on social media in any capacity.
- F. Prior to establishing educationally-based professional social media network or account, provide a written explanation of the purpose of the account to district level administrators for approval. Professional use of social media should be approved by a district-level administrator, or his or her designee. Faculty sponsors of a school sponsored activity, club or organization with social media accounts must complete a Social Media Account Request Form and provide password and login information to a district level administrator or designee. In the event of a password change, the faculty sponsor will provide the updated password to a district-level administrator or designee.
- G. If a social media network or account that encourages student participation is approved, parents/guardians should be notified of the purpose and provided an opportunity to “opt out.”
- H. Images, audio, or videos of a school activities or students should not be digitally transmitted or streamed without prior written parental consent and/or must adhere to local district policies.
- I. Employees are encouraged to report inappropriate use of digital and/or social media to appropriate district administrators. Possible ethics violations may be reported to the Professional Licensure Standards Board utilizing the “Code of Ethics of Arkansas Educators Allegation of Violation” form.

Van Buren District employees should be aware of the potential danger in participating in the following forms of technology-based interactivity or connectivity:

- Sharing personal landline or cell phone numbers with students;
- Text messaging students;
- Emailing students other than through and to school controlled and monitored accounts;
- Soliciting students as friends or contacts on personal social networking websites;
- Accepting the solicitation of students as friends or contacts on personal social networking websites;
- Sharing personal websites or other media access information with students through which the staff member would share personal information and occurrences.

Legal Reference: RULES GOVERNING THE CODE OF ETHICS FOR ARKANSAS EDUCATORS

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