

# Keep the social out of social media, teachers told

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## **ADVICE TO TEACHERS**

- \* Communicate at appropriate times of the day and through established education platforms (such as school web pages)
- \* Maintain a formal courteous and professional tone in all communications with students.
- \* Avoid exchanging private texts, phone numbers, personal email addresses or photos of a personal nature with students
- \* Decline student-initiated "friend" requests and do not issue "friend" requests to students
- \* Notify parents/guardians before using social networks in classroom activities
- \* Monitor all content you or others post to your personal social media accounts and remove anything inappropriate
- \* Avoid online criticism about students, colleagues your employers
- \* Assume that information you post can be accessed or altered

*Source: Ontario College of Teachers*

Don't be social when using social media with students, Ontario teachers are being advised.

A report, to be released Monday, recommends teachers neither accept — nor send out — Facebook friend requests involving students. They should avoid texting, and never communicate by email using a personal account, says the advisory from the Ontario College of Teachers, the body that oversees the profession.

Online communications should be via "established education platforms" such as web pages set up for a school project or class, says the report, obtained by the *Star*.

Teachers should also only contact students electronically during the same times they'd feel comfortable calling home.

"When we are communicating with students, face-to-face or in more traditional ways, we are trying to replicate that in other media," said Michael Salvatori, the college's registrar.

"The informal language of texting is not the kind of interaction a teacher and student would have ... there are lots of ways teachers can be available for students without texting."

The report comes as school boards try to figure out how to create rules around the use of social media, without hampering efforts by educators to engage students by using it.

And, increasingly, just as in their real life, teachers' conduct online is also coming under scrutiny. Recently, in the U.S., teachers have been suspended for posting inappropriate comments on their personal Facebook pages, on their own time; one said he hated his job and students, another compared herself to a "warden" supervising "future criminals."

This is only the third advisory the college has ever issued, and it will follow-up with information sessions around the province this month and next.

Most boards in Greater Toronto do not have a social media policy as yet, but say general guidelines around teacher and online conduct cover it, for now.

Licinio Miguelo of the York Region District School Board said some schools use texting to reach truant teens, but that would be the extent of it.

Because it's so new to the classroom, it's important to make sure everyone's on-board when using social media, said Stephen Louca, a computer resource teacher with the York board.

His Grade 6 students last year used Twitter as a way to collaborate with each other, and with another class. Parents were first fully informed, and the children used superhero identities instead of their real names.

He also sought permission from the board, and school. "They are very open to ideas as long as you can justify how it benefits students," which is the only reason to be using it, he said.

Louca himself doesn't have a Facebook account, because "I'm not big on having my personal life out there. As a teacher, I do understand there isn't that separation between personal and professional."

Principal Greg Collins at Lorna Jackson Public School in Woodbridge began blogging about school events in January, as a way to reach out to families.

"One policy we worked on was that I can't put up pictures of students — I have samples of their work there, but I can't identify individual students. Boards are looking at all of that; certainly there are grey areas in terms of what you can and can't do."

That's because social media has exploded in the past few years, said Paul Elliott, vice-president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, which put out a pamphlet for teachers on the issue awhile ago.

It's the newly graduated teachers who tend to have a tough time at the start, he added.

"They've been active on Facebook, and they are moving into a profession" where behaviour that wasn't considered objectionable before is now inappropriate — such as posting a picture enjoying a beer with friends, he said.

As for texting, it can sometimes prove "a useful tool of communication in the classroom, with the curriculum — but that's the only time it should be in use."

The college has also warned teachers anything they post online can be altered, and that "innocent actions" can be "easily misconstrued or manipulated." The report cites several disciplinary cases, albeit extreme ones, where emails or other online communications were involved.

As for concerns about teachers feeling hampered in their efforts to connect with kids who prefer texting to talking face-to-face, Salvatori said: "There are a lot of ways teachers can be available for students without having to be texting."

Catherine Fife, of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, called the college's report "timely and needed."

However, she added, "we do need to acknowledge the changing learning styles of today's students; it's important not to lose sight of the potential of social media to enhance learning opportunities" and student engagement.

[MORE: University of Toronto professor sets strict email rules with students](#)

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