POOLING
RISK CONTROL BULLETIN
December 2010
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THE PITFALLS OF ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Educators are continually seeking new and innovative methods to motivate students to participate and learn. The use of modern means of communication is virtually required when attempting to engage today's tech-savvy students. In many cases, e-mails, text messages and class websites are the preferred methods of transmitting information to students outside the classroom.

An increasing number of educators are also using social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, to help get students more involved in their studies. While this is a laudable goal, these hold the potential for abuse, which can have a detrimental effect on both educators and students.

In a number of recent cases, teachers and school employees have used social networking sites to engage in sexual misconduct with and abuse against students. This bad behavior has manifested itself in everything from transmitting inappropriate words and images and adults posing as minors, to actual meetings and even sexual contact. Although social networking sites do not cause this type of inappropriate behavior, they may facilitate it by virtue of its easy accessibility and the perception of anonymity.

Teachers can also be at risk. Teachers have been disciplined and even dismissed over the content of their Facebook pages and personal blogs. Some information found on these sites, although acceptable in a purely social context, may not be appropriate for a professional educator. Additionally, students have used personal information found on social networking sites to harass, annoy and bully teachers and other school employees.

A number of school districts have adopted or are considering "electronic contact" policies that restrict or eliminate the use of electronic communication and social networking sites by teachers. A



new state law in Louisiana mandates that all school districts require documentation of every electronic interaction between teachers and students through non-school-issued devices. It also allows parents the option of forbidding any communication by means of personal electronic devices between their children and the teachers.

Even with legal concerns about teachers posting too much personal information or inappropriate communication with students through social networking sites, it is still possible for teachers to maintain an online presence. Some things to keep in mind include:

1. Only school-owned or controlled equipment should be used to communicate with students.

2. Teachers should not allow students to be their "friend" on Facebook. A proper professional distance should be maintained between teachers and their students.

3. Personal pages should be kept private since it is safe to assume that anything posted on the internet can probably be located by someone.

4. Make sure nothing posted on a social networking site would be embarrassing if found by a student, parent of a student or a supervisor.

5. Teachers should ask themselves "how much information is too much information?"

6. Remember, the poster is responsible for any content online, on the computer and linked to the page *even if the account is hacked*.

7. Any morally or ethically inappropriate content may harm the writer's professional status or even their ability to function in their teaching position.

The observations, comments and suggestions we have made in this report are advisory and are not intended nor should they be taken as legal advice. Please contact your own legal adviser for an analysis of your specific facts and circumstances.