

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Board Policy GAMIA – Electronic Communications Between Employees and Students

- Electronic communications between teachers and students must be professional and limited to information that is school related.
- Electronic communications should be made only through systems provided by the School Board (e.g. JPPSS e-mail address or other sanctioned means of communication).
- **In other words, you should NOT be communicating with students on social media or by any other non-sanctioned means of communication.**
- Any communications between teachers and students that are not on district communications systems must be authorized by the principal.
- Authorization may be approved for communications relative to extracurricular activities, sports or other outside activities.
- You are required to report any communication you receive from a student on non-District systems (e.g. Facebook or other social network sites)
- You are also required to report communications between other employees and students using non-District systems.
- Violations of the policy will be investigated and may result in disciplinary action up to, and including, termination of employment.

Social Media

- While you have a constitutional right to free speech as an American, that right is tempered by the obligations you accepted when you chose to work in the public school system. So, even though you are free to enjoy a Facebook account, post videos, or share your photos on Instagram, remember that you have an obligation to uphold your professional position in the community. Think about the content of what you post. . . . If you are wondering whether you should post something – the answer is probably “No”.
- With social media, as with many things, it is probably better to err on the side of caution.
- General comments concerning matters of public concern will typically be protected speech, but publishing information that you learn in the course of your employment will not necessarily have such protection. ***Think carefully before posting any comments that reveal information you have obtained as a result of your job.***
- Never, ever post any comments about a student in particular or your students in general that could in any way suggest their identities or their less than stellar existence as a person or performance as a student.
- Remember that a waiver that a parent signs to give permission to allow publication of a student photograph is usually applicable *only to the school district’s use* and not to the individual teacher’s use. Don’t post student or class photos on anything other than school or district website and make sure you have parental consent before doing so.
- When you see that a student at any school in your district has sent you a “friend request” or a request to “follow” – **JUST SAY NO.** If you already have “friends” or “followers” who are current students, the best advice is to “unfriend” or “block” each of them from your site.

- Be aware of the potential results of posting party pix, seductive selfies and other photos that portray you in a sexually inappropriate or otherwise adverse light. Like it or not, parents expect teachers and others who work with children to set a positive example by conducting themselves in a respectable, professional manner at all times. When parents (and students) see inappropriate photos of and posts by teachers, the resulting complaints can quickly infect the classroom and the teacher's ability to command the respect and control necessary to perform and invariable cause a disruption of the educational process.

Work-related versus Personal Accounts and Activities

- Avoid the use of personal accounts to conduct work-related communications. The fact that you are using a personal email account doesn't necessary mean that the communication is not subject to disclosure either in the context of litigation or a public records request.
- Devices or other equipment provided to or accessible to staff are for school system-related activities only. Any other use by staff, except in cases of emergency, is not appropriate. Misuse of the device or equipment may be the basis for loss of access and/or other disciplinary action. Use of and all activities and communications on such devices and equipment are subject to review by school administration at any time!

Text Based Communications (Other than Social Media)

- Teachers, administrators, and staff members with a need to know information regarding a particular student may communicate between or among each other regarding a student via school-provided equipment.
- Teachers and other school instructional staff may exchange communications regarding a child's academic or disciplinary performance/record in order to assist in the instructional setting; however, be aware that even emails from a school account somehow make their way to parents.

- Refrain from putting any identifying information about a student in the subject line.
- Limit e-mail chains or streams where responses to responses stretch on for days. It is better to respond to a single email message or simply begin a new message before responding.
- Avoid using “reply all.” Too often, an email will go to an unintended recipient (e.g. parent) using a “reply all” option. An improper forward/response can be embarrassing at the very least but also could lead to violations of privacy laws.
- Do not use language that would not be appropriate and professional to say to a person (e.g. parent) if you were having a face-to-face conversation. It is tempting to “vent” frustrations, particularly with a challenging parent or child. However, what you put “out there” in writing is “permanent” product which can be accessed at a later time. Off-the-cuff remarks and sarcastic comments can damage a hard-earned professional reputation and may lead to civil liability (for example, an action by a parent against you personally) and/or disciplinary action (by the school system).
- Understand that the mere fact that you are not sending communication **to** a parent and/or you intended the communication to be “personal” will likely NOT limit access to the communication under applicable law, if the communication contains personally identifiable information about a student.
- If you take notes about a student, make sure that the content of the notes (including the margins and back sides) remain professional and free of off-hand (i.e. inappropriate) comments of any kind. Under certain circumstances, these notes may be subject to disclosure, for example, by court order.

- If you are communicating with another employee about a student, limit the content of the communication to a single student, to the extent possible.
- Avoid making any statement about a parent, student, fellow employee or otherwise that could be construed as derogatory. Remember that tone of voice is absent from the written word, so often, words written as a joke may be taken as sarcastic or serious.
- In the realm of litigation, the wide net of electronic discovery will scoop up your electronic communications – whether deleted or not. Emails, texts, social media posts – are all accessible and can be obtained through a variety of means.
- If you are engaged in a written exchange with a parent that has become contentious, end the exchange politely before things escalate. Be the one to send the final email by saying something like: “Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this matter. I will pass along all of this information that we’ve discussed to (the appropriate administrator). I look forward to continuing to work with you toward a resolution”.
- If engaged in a written exchange that has ticked you off, prepare your response, but put it aside for a while, let someone you trust proof it, and allow yourself a cooling off period before re-reading and re-writing it, if necessary, to avoid charging the situation even more with a quick response.
- This is an absolute requirement of ALL written communications: proofread before pressing “send”!! Correct all errors in grammar, punctuation, style, content. Remember – You are what you present yourself to be. Do not leave the recipient to wonder how you ever got a college degree much less a job in education.

Verbal Communications

Finally, a word about verbal communications:

- Every cell phone has a voice recorder. Assume that any conversation you have is being recorded. As long as one party to the conversation “consents” to a conversation being recorded, Louisiana law allows such recording without your knowledge or consent.
- Document in writing all verbal conversations with parents and third parties. That written record can be useful later if you need to recollect or prove what was discussed.
- When possible, have another staff member present when meeting personally with any parent about a matter which could escalate or otherwise become problematic. If having another staff member present is not possible, have the meeting in a more public location such as the library.