

E-MAIL AND TEXT MESSAGING ADVICE TO MEMBERS

Context

ETFO continues to be concerned that members may be engaging in inappropriate e-mail and text messaging communications with students.

Members of ETFO have previously been advised of the problems associated with e-mails and other forms of electronic communication between teachers and students.

See the following publications in the Professional Relations section of the ETFO website. Go to www.etfo.ca and follow the links:

- *Allegations of Sexual Misconduct* ("Avoid sending e-mails to students, do not give out your personal e-mail address.") PRS Matters Special Edition, October 2002
- *Professional Boundaries* ("Writing or exchanging notes, letters or e-mails" is designated as an "unacceptable behaviour" that could qualify as a boundary violation.) PRS Matters Volume 3
- *Electronic Communications* (This issue sheet focuses on student misuse of electronic communications and warns members that electronic communications are not secure and can be misused.) PRS Matters Volume 9, August 2002

Analysis

Community use and access to e-mails and text messaging continues to expand as more people become proficient and reliant on these simple forms of communication.

Electronic text communication is no longer restricted to the e-mail format:

- Electronic "chat rooms" allow real time text communication between any number of people.
- MSN Messaging, and other similar applications (such as ICQ, which is an icon for "I seek you"), are instant messaging systems that allow real time text communication with any number of individuals.
- Cell phone text messaging.

Students are especially proficient in, and prone to use, these forms of electronic communication. The result is that these forms of communication can appear tempting because of ease of use and ease of access.

E-mails, and even more so instant messaging systems, by their very nature promote a casual tone, familiarity, the use of slang and colloquialisms, short-form electronic language (a common example is "lol" which stands for "laughing out loud" which communicates to others that the person writing is laughing), all of which have the potential to erode the professional nature of the student-teacher relationship.

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Recent allegations against members of ETFO involving e-mails and text messaging reveal the following:

- Members using forms of e-mails and text messaging with students very rapidly adopt a casual, familiar tone.
- In a brief period of time following the initiation of this type of communication with students (sometimes days or even hours), members can begin to use inappropriate language and inappropriately share and receive personal information.
- Members who use e-mails and text messaging are prone to becoming a "friend" of the student (or students). Professional boundaries, which are solely the responsibility of the member to maintain, become dangerously eroded or entirely dissolved.
- This type of communication leads to the member commenting on student-parent and student-student relationships.
- For a variety of reasons e-mails and text messaging generate a false sense of security and privacy. Nothing could be further from the truth: e-mails and text messaging are subject to interception, alteration, manipulation, and transmission to unknown others.
- E-mails and text messaging with students leave members vulnerable to allegations of misconduct including and beyond the e-mails

and text messaging themselves.

- There is an emerging and alarming relationship between allegations of sexual misconduct and the use of e-mails and text messaging between the member and the complainant.
- Members who use e-mails and text messaging with students, and who then face false allegations of sexual misconduct, can expect their employer, as well as criminal and College of Teachers' prosecutors, to use the e-mails and text messaging against them as evidence supporting the allegations. This makes a defence against such allegations all the more difficult.

Advice to Members of ETFO

E-mails and text messaging are becoming so simple and so prevalent that they may, one day, become a normal part of the education system relied upon by educators and students. Until rules, protocols, and most importantly *express permission* for members to use e-mails and text messaging with students are implemented for district school boards, **these remain very dangerous modes of communication.**

Consistent with previous advice to members concerning electronic communications, ETFO cautions members about the risks regarding the use of e-mails and text messaging to communicate with students.

If you are experiencing difficulties and need to talk to someone in confidence, call staff in Professional Relations Services (PRS) at (416) 962-3836 or 1-888-838-3836.



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480 University Avenue, Suite 1000, Toronto, Ontario M5G 1V2
Telephone: (416) 962-3836 Toll Free: 1-888-838-3836
Fax: (416) 642-2424 Website: www.etfo.ca

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