

Electronic Communication and Social Media Advice to Members

You are a seasoned teacher. Your Grade 7 class is a handful. There are a couple of “bright lights” in your class who seem to reward all of your hard work. One in particular is a girl with so much potential you want to challenge her, help her, and watch her achieve remarkable things. You know that her family circumstances are difficult, and are amazed that she succeeds despite considerable obstacles. She confides in you that she struggles to study but is determined to do so. She thanks you for your help. One day she emails (or texts) you her considerable distress about whether she will be able to continue with her dream of going to university. You sense she is losing hope and you write back: “Don’t worry, I’ve got your back, I believe in you, you’re the best”. She emails back: “you have no idea what you mean to me, you are the key to my future, luv u.” You email back “luv u too sweetie, can’t wait to see you on Monday”. She emails you a “heart” emoticon in return.

Questions

Does this exchange concern you? Does it cause you to seek advice from ETFO? Does it cause you to report this email communication to your principal? Does it cause you to seek assistance from the guidance counselor or social worker? Does it cause you to speak to the student with a colleague present to discuss boundaries?

Does this interaction raise no cause for concern? Would you continue this type of communication with this student?

Answer

In the example above, the first time you emailed or texted this student you may have officially started down the “slippery slope” leading to boundary violations according to the Ontario College of Teachers and its [Professional Advisory: Maintaining Professionalism – Use of Electronic Communication and Social Media](#).

ETFO continues to support the responsible use of social media as an excellent teaching tool, provided it adheres to professional standards. ETFO warns its members that anything they post can be: forwarded, taken out of context, copied, manipulated, and impossible to remove from cyberspace. In the example above, this overly casual communication may be misconstrued as inappropriate, and as a boundary violation.

“Friending” students; posting pictures of partying, or sending overly casual messages or texts to students, parents, or others may lead to professional difficulties that you may not anticipate. While the use of technology has changed dramatically over time, the standards of professionalism have not changed. Interactions must be respectful, courteous, professional, and boundaries must be maintained. Members are expected to be friendly, but not “friends” with their students.

ETFO has seen an increase in cyberbullying by electronic media in the education community. Members of ETFO can be the target of this. Sometimes members initiate careless electronic communication which may have unintended, but grave professional consequences.

Some tips:

1. Communication with parents, students and other members of the education community is best done verbally or face to face in a professional and structured manner.
2. Casual, off hand, joking remarks, or expressions of support via electronic media are easily misconstrued.
3. Pictures of you, chat discussions you initiate or participate in, and email or text messages between you and others create a permanent record. Reflect on your electronic postings.
4. Advise friends and family not to post pictures of you on social media sites without first asking for your consent.
5. Slow down. Don't press "send" until you evaluate whether or not your postings, texts, emails will be considered professional and appropriate in the education community.
6. You are not your students' "friend". You are their teacher and must maintain a professionally appropriate relationship. If in doubt, call to find out.

ETFO has previously distributed a variety of publications on the topic of the appropriate professional use of electronic communication – see PRS Matters Volumes 48, 46 and 25 and VOICE articles from December 2008 – *Cyberbullying* and October 2007 – *Think Before You Click*. These are available on the ETFO website.

For more information, contact Professional Relations Services Staff at 416-962-3836 or 1-888-838-3836 at the provincial office. Also see ETFO's website - Advice for Members.

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