



Cyberconduct and Electronic Communications – Important Information and Guidelines for Teachers

Introduction

Information and communication technology (ICT) is a regular part of everyday life for most people. Texting, e-mail, chats, blogs, YouTube, dating websites, Twitter, Facebook, etc., to name just a few examples, have changed the way we communicate and socialize, both personally and professionally. While advances in ICT have, in many ways, made the sharing of information faster and more efficient, the seemingly endless possibilities should not cause us to lose sight of the related concerns and hazards that have arisen due to the widespread use of ICT. Teachers need to be well informed and cautious about both their own use of ICT as well as the potential negative impact of inappropriate use of this technology by students and parents.

Why Be Concerned?

NLTA policy on Cyberconduct and Cyberbullying defines ICT as: *Equipment that includes, but is not limited to, any current and emerging stationary or wireless technologies or systems that can be used by individuals or groups for the purpose of communication, entertainment, data management, word processing, internet access, image capture/ recording, sound recording and information transmitting/ receiving/ storing.*

The broad range of devices and technology captured by this definition clearly illustrates the wide scope of potential issues and concerns for teachers. Some of the reasons the NLTA feels there is a need for caution and concern are:

- lack of privacy or security;
- websites that malign teachers;
- increase in incidents of cyberbullying;
- anonymous messages and social media postings;
- messages, photos, videos, etc. posted or distributed without permission;

- on-line access to personal information; and,
- potential blurring of professional boundaries.

While advances in technology have had certain positive effects on teachers' work lives, growing reliance on and expectations regarding the professional use of ICT also raise workload related issues. On-line listings of school and district staff e-mail addresses, homework sites, etc. have opened up new lines of communication for the entire school community. In some ways, this has been a positive development. However, teachers must be cautious that expectations not become unreasonable. Ongoing communication at all hours to and from parents, students and district officials is not acceptable and teachers need to set reasonable limits in this regard.

Also, teachers need to be conscious of the risks inherent in any use of ICT, either at school or at home. It is always important for teachers to remember that off-duty conduct can have employment consequences if it has a negative impact in the professional context. As professionals, teachers are expected to model ethical and appropriate use of ICT. Teachers hold a position of trust with students and can be held accountable if their actions expose students to inappropriate material or communications. Texting, e-mail, and all forms of social media can be risky, especially when personal or intimate information is shared. This is an even greater concern when teachers are using school technology. It is crucial to remember that school districts own the computers and Internet connection in schools. Nothing is private when you use digital communication. School boards can access browsing histories and any electronic communications that have gone through their servers or have been accessed using district equipment.

Guidelines and Advice

In light of the above referenced concerns and risks, some general advice and principles that should guide teachers' electronic communications and social media usage are:

- always maintain a professional demeanor in electronic communications with students, parents, colleagues and administrators. Avoid slang or casual language and use Canadian grammar and spelling checks as well as a signature that includes your name, assignment/title and school name;
- do not write messages in all CAPITAL letters - this comes across as aggressive;
- save or keep a printed copy of all work-related e-mail messages;
- avoid lengthy, detailed e-mail exchanges. This increases workload, and protracted written exchanges are prone to misinterpretation. Respond to complex messages from parents by telephone or in a face-to-face meeting;
- do not use your personal e-mail account or cell phone for work related contact with students or parents;
- place reasonable professional limits on contact with students and parents outside of regular work hours and exercise extreme caution in using texts, e-mail, or social media for personal contact with students or parents;
- ensure your privacy settings on social media sites are at the highest possible level for all content;
- be extremely cautious of: posting, or allowing others to post, your personal information and images on-line; participating in blogs, chats, social media and dating sites, etc.
- **Students should NOT be your “friends” on Facebook** or any other social media site. Maintain appropriate professional boundaries at all times;
- never leave your computer unattended if it is logged into the school district server or your work email account;
- protect your user name and password from identity theft in order to prevent unauthorized e-mail under your name or access to school documents and other confidential information;
- be aware of and comply with your school district’s acceptable use of technology and email policies;
- never use electronic communications, including social media, to share confidential information or criticize students, parents, colleagues, administrators or your employer. This information could be accessed by or forwarded to others without your knowledge or consent.

Cyberbullying

Unfortunately, social cruelty among young people is a reality and is growing in the form of cyberbullying. NLTA policy defines cyberbullying (and cybermisconduct) as: *the use of information and communication technology to bully, embarrass, threaten or harass another. It also includes the use of information and communication technology to engage in conduct or behaviour that is derogatory, defamatory, degrading, illegal, and/or abusive.* Teachers are sometimes the targets of cyberbullying. It is important that school boards and teachers take an active role in educating and informing students and parents about acceptable cyberconduct and digital citizenship, as well as

responding appropriately to incidents of cyberbullying against students and teachers. If a teacher is a victim of cybermisconduct /cyberbullying, the following advice should be followed:

- make a hard copy and/or screen capture or otherwise save any offensive messages, comment, posts, images, texts, videos, etc.;
- when possible, block further contact and/or prevent continuing communications;
- request/demand that offensive material be removed immediately, stating that it is unacceptable and inappropriate. Do not further engage the person who is targeting you online/in writing as this may escalate the situation;
- if the cyberbully is a student, contact the parents and involve your school administration to ensure that proper consequences are put in place, in keeping with school district policy (e.g. Safe and Caring Schools, NLESD Social Media Policy);
- if the cyberbully is a parent, request a meeting to discuss the issue and to reinforce the proper channels for parents to communicate and address concerns with appropriate school staff;
- if the situation is severe and/or the inappropriate communications continues, advise and seek the support and involvement of your school administration;
- report abuse/inappropriate use to the administrator of the social media platform in question and ask to have the post(s) removed. For example, there is a “Report Post” option for Facebook posts; the Snapchat website has a reporting function under the “Community Guidelines” heading; and you can select “Report Something” under “Terms” and also under “Privacy” on the Instagram website, etc.;
- Seek school district support for matters that cannot be resolved at the school level;
- some things that are posted online may be considered criminal acts – if there is a question as to whether this is the case, or if you feel your personal safety is at risk, you should contact the police;
- teachers/administrators should contact a staff member in Programs and Services at the NLTA if actions taken to address the situation are ineffective and/or if you need further support or advice.

Information and Resources

For additional information, Media Smarts (mediasmarts.ca) offers useful information and resources on safe and appropriate cyberconduct for teachers and students. As well, cyberbullying.ca is a great resource for teachers, parents and students. The Canadian Teachers’ Federation publication “Cybertips for Teachers” is also available on-line at www.ctf-fce.ca in both French and English.