

Professional Boundaries in Digital Communication

Digital communication has become an integral part of education, supporting collaboration and engagement among colleagues, students, and parents/guardians. While digital technologies such as email, learning management systems, messaging platforms, and video conferencing tools offer significant benefits, they also create considerations around privacy and security. Digital communications can be saved, altered, shared, or viewed by unintended audiences, and misunderstandings may arise more easily in the absence of face-to-face interactions and context.

Because digital communication can blur professional boundaries, particularly when communicating with students, members must exercise their professional judgement and carefully consider the content, tone, timing, and purpose of all digital interactions.

Best Practices for Maintaining Professional Boundaries Online

General

- Always maintain a professional demeanour in interactions with students, parents/guardians, colleagues, and administrators.
- Remember that professional standards apply in all digital environments.
- Use only board-approved communication tools and technology when communicating with students, parents/guardians, colleagues, and administrators.
- Consider whether the communication is educationally necessary, professionally appropriate, and consistent with your role as an educator.
- Pause before sending and consider how the communication may be interpreted by others. Be clear, professional, and explicit in your intent.
- Assume that any digital communication may be saved, recorded, shared, forwarded, or viewed by unintended audiences.

Communicating with students

- Always maintain professional boundaries.
- Keep communications focused on educational purposes.
- Avoid personal, overly familiar, or emotionally dependent interactions.
- Be mindful of tone, timing, frequency, and content.
- Do not communicate with, follow, or “friend” students through social media accounts or private messaging platforms.
- Avoid discussions that could be interpreted as inappropriate or outside the scope of your professional role.

Communicating with parents and guardians

- Keep communications professional, respectful, and focused on educational matters.
- Be mindful of tone, timing, frequency, and content.
- Use caution when discussing sensitive or complex issues electronically.
- Consider whether a phone call or a face-to-face meeting would be more effective.
- Do not communicate with, follow, or “friend” parents/guardians through social media accounts or private messaging platforms.
- Remember that communications may be shared with others or used in future proceedings.

Communicating with colleagues and administrators

- Maintain a professional tone in all communications, even when you have an established personal rapport with the recipient.
- Avoid gossip, speculation, or disparaging comments about students, parents/guardians, colleagues, administrators, or the school board.
- Respect confidentiality and do not share sensitive, personal, or employment-related information unless authorized to do so.
- Use board-approved and board-provided communication tools and technology for work-related matters.
- Avoid using text messaging as the primary means of communication with your administrator, particularly for sensitive, complex, or contentious issues.
- Remember that work-related digital communications may become part of a complaint, investigation, legal proceeding, or freedom of information (FOI) request. Write every message as though it may be reviewed by others in the future.
- Address workplace concerns through appropriate professional channels rather than through social media, group chats, or other informal online forums.
- Avoid sending messages when angry, frustrated, or emotionally charged. Take time to reflect before responding.
- Maintain accurate and professional records of important communications.

Social media and online presence

- Avoid interacting with students and parents/guardians on social media.
- Consider how posts, comments, photographs, likes, shares, and reactions may be perceived by students, parents/guardians, colleagues, administrators, and the broader community.
- Do not criticize or demean your school board, students, parents/guardians, colleagues, or administrators through social media or other public online platforms.
- Always maintain student confidentiality and privacy, and exercise extreme caution when posting content related to students or school activities.
- Review privacy settings regularly.
- Be mindful that personal content may become publicly accessible or be shared beyond its intended audience.

Protect Yourself

- **Do not use personal devices for work-related communications.**
- Use board-provided equipment when taking photographs, videos, or recordings of students and avoid using personal devices unless specifically authorized by board policy.
- Use strong passwords and multi-factor authentication.
- Protect access to your accounts and devices.
- Do not share login credentials.
- Keep records of significant communications.
- Do not store photographs of students, student work, or other student information on personal devices unless specifically authorized and protected in accordance with board policies.
- Review messages for accuracy, tone, professionalism, and confidentiality before sending.

For further information contact your local ETFO president or Professional Relations Services staff at 416-962-3836 or 1-888-838-3836.

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