

## Friend or Foe? Balancing the Good and Bad of Social-Networking Sites

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Principal Conn McCartan of Minnesota's Eden Prairie High School had no plans to police the Internet and its social spheres. But in January, he was mailed a computer disk containing photos of students drinking alcohol, and the photos had been posted on the social-networking Web site [Facebook](#). McCartan couldn't ignore the rule-breaking.

McCartan and his staff interviewed 43 students; 13 of them were subsequently disciplined. Most were members of athletic teams and clubs that have specific prohibitions and penalties for underage drinking.

"Facebook is a public site, but we didn't go out there looking for it," McCartan says of the misbehavior that came to light. "Somebody sends us something, and we're obligated to respond."

### Social Networking: Good or Bad

With the advent and rapid growth of social-networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, an increasingly significant portion of school-age socializing takes place online. The result is that school leaders are being forced to deal with a host of unsettled and even unsavory issues—such as when to monitor students' online activities, and how to deal with the very real results of online socialization that spills into school hallways.

As educators begin to appreciate the influence these cyber networks are having in the world of teenagers, they are also mulling ways of drawing on that electronic muscle to forge a deeper educational connection between students and their studies. But experts say educators must have a clear vision and guidelines for doing so, or they will face serious technical and legal pitfalls. And, beyond those steps, experts say schools have a role to play in educating students about safely and appropriately using such sites.

"These things are very powerful," says Tom Hutton, a senior staff attorney at the National School Boards Association. "More and more schools are realizing that it's something we should find a way to tap into."

### 'Very Little Precedent'

Students are using social-networking sites more than many school officials may realize. Despite the fact that most schools block access to such sites via school computers, 9- to 17-year-olds spend as much time using the Internet for social activities as they spend watching television—about nine hours a week, according to a 2007 study by the Alexandria, Va.-based NSBA. The study of more than 1,200 students found that 96 percent of those with online access had used social-networking technology—including text messaging—and 81 percent said they had visited a social-networking Web site at least once within the three months before the study was conducted.

More and more, those sites have become places where students engage in public actions or behaviors they probably don't want their principals or teachers to know about. Students in New York City's Staten Island borough were unmasked as graffiti artists earlier this year after posting pictures and video of their "tags" on MySpace and the video site YouTube. In York, Pa., 18 high school students faced disciplinary action after Facebook photos surfaced showing students with alcohol. The list of students nabbed for improper behavior through posts on social-networking sites reaches across the country.

### Social Networking TIPS

1. Establish a policy for dealing with incidents in which students break school rules and their inappropriate behavior is showcased publicly on social-networking sites.
2. Outline clear guidelines for administrators that spell out how schools should discipline students based on information garnered from social-networking sites, and let parents and students know about those rules.
3. Educate students about online-safety issues and how to use sites such as Facebook and MySpace responsibly.
4. Have a policy in place for dealing with cyber bullying.
5. If teachers are using social-networking sites for educational purposes, they should establish clear guidelines for how they intend to communicate with students via those sites.

Though most school administrators don't spend their days trolling such sites for evidence of students' unseemly actions—and don't want to—they're regularly faced with deciding when to follow up on tips or rumors.

"Does a school's authority reach out to that wacky party on Saturday night that was documented by cellphones?" says Timothy J. Magner, the director of the U.S. Department of Education's office of educational technology. "It's clearly one of those evolving community dialogues."

McCartan, the principal in the 10,000-student Eden Prairie school district, says even if school officials say they're not going to monitor students' behavior on the Internet, administrators need to be prepared when such a situation arises. At Eden Prairie High, school leaders had already talked with families about the importance of monitoring social-networking sites and discussed "what happens when we would receive this type of information and how we would react," McCartan says.

"We thought this through ahead of time, and went through our own guidelines and consulted with legal counsel," he says. "We knew if we proceeded this way with this information, that we were rock solid."

Montana Miller, an assistant professor of popular culture at Bowling Green State University in Ohio and an expert on Facebook, says the issue remains complicated. Policies are still developing, and legal issues surrounding social-networking sites have not been settled.

"There's very little precedent to go on, and it's important to remember to take each case in its own context," Miller says. "I do not think that schools should try to monitor and control Facebook the way they might try to monitor and control on-campus student expression in a traditional way."

Miller acknowledges that the rules for school administrators are "murky," but agrees that school leaders should discuss strategies for handling situations connected to social-networking sites before being faced with a dilemma.

"The key is that each school needs to have a discussion and come up with a policy, and then that policy has to be made clear to teachers, parents, and students," she says. "Then that policy has to be followed. It's really important not to play fast and loose with these policies, because that's so hypocritical."

### **From Virtual to Reality**

All the cyber socializing by students in their after-school hours inevitably leaks into schools. In the 137,000-student Montgomery County, Md., public schools, Walt Whitman High School had two recent social situations that went from the virtual world to reality. In April, Whitman Principal Alan S. Goodwin handled two separate incidents in which taunting and name-calling on Facebook resulted in physical fights at school. Two of the students fighting were girls, and two were boys.

Goodwin put out an e-mail asking parents to closely monitor what their children were writing on Facebook and to consider calling the police if a student was being bullied online. A new Maryland law adds cyberbullying to the legal definition of bullying in the state and requires school boards to write anti-bullying policies by next year.

"One of the problems with Facebook is that people are more willing to say things there than they ever would to a person's face," Goodwin says. "If two kids are name-calling, their friends are on Facebook too, watching it. ... They try to incite the situation."

Many schools felt compelled to develop cyberbullying policies after the suicide last year of a 13-year-old Missouri girl, Megan Meier, who was the victim of virtual bullying through her MySpace page. Even so, some school officials still don't understand the impact such harassment can have, says Miller, the Facebook expert.

"Never respond with 'Just turn off the computer,' " she says. "That's completely missing the essential nature of what it is to be a young person today. Facebook, MySpace, online communication, text messaging, and instant messaging are all integral parts of the social world of young people, and to tell them to turn off the computer is not the answer."

McCartan says his approach to online bullying mirrors the one he'd take with verbal or physical bullying that occurs in person and off school grounds.

"We've been well served by reacting the same way we would to this information if it came to us any other way," the Minnesota principal says. "Just because it exists online or in the electronic community instead of person to person, let's apply the exact same standards."

Hutton of the NSBA advises school leaders to first try mediating between the students and getting the parents involved. He says the same goes for situations in which school leaders may be alerted to pictures of students consuming alcohol or drugs, but in ways that don't directly tie to school disciplinary infractions.

"School safety officers may be plugging in the name of their school [in an online search] and seeing what's out there, but it doesn't give them carte blanche to go after people," he says. "We urge school boards and lawyers to talk through this and be very assertive about where your authority is."