

Social Media Guidelines for Staff

Students want to take the technology they use in their daily lives and integrate it with how they learn. More and more, they tell us that they want, and need, their learning experiences in school to reflect this. As students learn to use social media, it is important to empower them to build strong online safety skills and to establish an appropriate and positive digital footprint. One of the best ways to do this is to model the responsible and professional use of social media.

For the purposes of these guidelines, *social media* refers to online technology tools that enable people and organizations to communicate and share information and resources over the Internet. Users provide information, but can also interact with each other using social media. Examples include, but are not limited to blogs, Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Twitter and YouTube. Using this definition, the Peel District School Board's Office 365 environment can also be viewed as social media.

The Peel board recognizes that the use of social media is optional and that staff members are using social media to support their instructional practice and develop professional learning networks (PLN). The following guidelines have been reviewed by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (Peel District School Board), Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (District 19) and Ontario Principals' Council – Peel.

The guidelines are intended to help staff use social media safely, responsibly and successfully. They align with Peel board policies and procedures related to the use of technology.

1. Authorization

Board authorization is not required for staff to open a personal social media account. If you plan to use social media for instructional purposes (e.g., classroom Twitter account or blog), please inform your principal of your intended use.

Classroom social media accounts are seen as extensions of the school and must reflect the mission, vision and values of the Peel board. If a concern is raised about a classroom account, the principal will address any activity that may negatively impact the school, staff and students.

2. Personal v. professional

Every time you communicate, whether it's in-person or on social media, you shape public opinion about you, your profession, your school, your board and public education. Statements like, "Tweets are my own and don't reflect my employer's views," don't hold true for educators.

Although staff lead private lives, the Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that teachers' off-duty conduct, even when not directly related to students, is relevant to their suitability to teach.ⁱ As such, staff should use sound judgment and due care when using social media while on and off duty.

- Maintain a sense of professionalism at all times—in your personal and professional lives.
- We strongly advise against the use of a blended personal and professional account. Staff are encouraged to maintain a clear distinction between their personal and professional social media use, and should have two separate accounts for these purposes.
- If staff choose to have personal social media accounts, they should be separate from their professional accounts (i.e. Personal Learning Network (PLN), classroom, department, school accounts).
- Social media accounts for the purpose of voluntary, self-directed professional development are supported, e.g. to build a PLN.
- Staff should communicate with students for educational purposes only. Avoid or limit sharing personal information with students.
- Texting students is inappropriate whether for personal or educational purposes.
- Posting images or content related to alcohol and/or tobacco use cannot happen on classroom, department and professional accounts, and is discouraged on personal accounts.
- If you have a personal social media account that students become aware of, refer them back to the educational account for discussion rather than permitting personal or private messages.

3. Professional boundaries

Maintaining professional boundaries on social media is critical to sustaining public trust and ensuring relationships with students remain professional. Remember that, on social media, the world is watching.

- All online dialogue and interactions with students should be for educational purposes only.
- Your social media interactions should be professional and reflect the board's character attributes: caring, co-operative, honest, inclusive, respectful and responsible.
- Be mindful of all equity and inclusivity-related board policies and the Ontario Human Rights Code when posting content.
- Your tone should be formal and professional when communicating with students and others via social media.
- Do not send private messages and/or texts to students.
- Never share information with students online that would not be appropriate to share in a classroom, or school/community setting. What is inappropriate in the classroom is also inappropriate on social media.
- Keep your posts positive and do not engage in negative or critical conversations online.

- Retweets, likes and favourites are perceived as endorsements. These interactions should be limited and done with care.

4. Privacy and confidentiality

Safety is the overriding concern with regard to information posted online. Always respect the privacy and confidentiality of student information. Breaches of privacy and confidentiality can occur with respect to the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, the Youth Criminal Justice Act, and board policies and procedures.

- Familiarize yourself with the social media tool's privacy settings. Settings can change without notice so you will need to check them frequently. This often occurs when platforms are updated.
- Ensure privacy settings are appropriate and protect the privacy and confidentiality of students and their work.
- Staff must never disclose confidential information about the school, students and colleagues.
- Particular care must be taken with students for whom the principal has identified custody/safety concerns.
- Personal information, including student names, location, etc., should not be posted on social media without informed consent from students' parents/guardians. This includes, but is not limited to blogs, student work, individual and group photographs, videos featuring the student or other identifying information.
- Informed consent is necessary when placing personal student information online. Consent is provided via the blanket consent form that is sent home with all students at the start of the school year.
- The blanket consent form should include a letter that provides specific information about how a student's image, name and work will be showcased on social media. Staff should disclose which networks they will use and how they will be used to connect with students online for classroom purposes. If interactions will take place on social media after school hours, for educational purposes only, this should be included in the letter. *See link to template letter under "Additional resources" at the end of this document.*
- Events such as school excursions (where students are leaving school or board premises on a school-sponsored activity) must not be posted prior to the event. However, vague posts that do not include the time and location of the excursion are permitted, e.g. Grade 9 Science Trip on April 7.
- Information and/or calendar entries about extracurricular activities must not be posted prior to the event. This includes meetings, practices, games, etc. However, vague posts that do not include the time and location of the activity are permitted, e.g. Check the Chess Club bulletin board for meeting updates.
- Information about events that are open to parents and the public can be posted prior to the event taking place.

- Everything you post can be altered and shared, even if your account is anonymous. Comments expressed privately between social media users can be shared in a more public domain, even with privacy settings set to high.

5. Photos and student work

The Peel board's [School Website, Internet and Intranet Posting Operating Procedure](#) provides guidance regarding the types of information staff should avoid posting online to help keep students and staff safe.

The blanket consent form that goes home with students at the start of the school year covers social media. Elementary students who return signed forms can have their names, images and student works posted on social media. Secondary students who do not return a signed form can also have their names, images and student works posted on social media.

- Tag photos and posts with care, especially when you post photos of others.
- Photos of and videos featuring students should not be posted on social media without the informed consent of a parent/guardian.
- Student work cannot be posted on social media without the informed consent from students' parents/guardians.
- Students/parents/guardians must be informed of the intention to post images, videos, and/or student work online. The consent form must include exactly what will be posted, e.g. student's first and last names, grade, activity, etc.
- Group photos (e.g. a sports team or musical group) may be used with informed consent from everyone in the photograph.
- As a courtesy, verbal consent should be obtained from any adult (teacher, parent, volunteer, other board staff member) whose photo, video footage and/or work is posted on social media. Exceptions include images of principals, vice-principals and trustees that are taken during the course of their employment or photos taken at public events where there is no expectation of privacy.
- Consent is not required for photos and videos that are taken at public meetings and/or events.
- Students for whom consent is not provided must be excluded and/or have their faces blurred.

6. Who to "friend" and "follow"

Staff should not have online interactions with students on social media outside of forums/platforms dedicated to educational use. This is consistent with the advice provided in Ontario College of Teachers' [Professional Advisory: Use of electronic communication and social media](#).

- Do not issue or accept student *friend requests* or *follow* individual students on social media.
- Staff should decline students' *friend* requests on social media.
- If you have a classroom account where you share important curricular information with students, students may *follow* your account. For the purposes of learning, you do not need to *follow* them back. Instead, you can encourage students to use tools, like hashtags, so that you can follow their online conversations. These can be linked to a specific area of study.

7. Professional hours

Social media operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This doesn't mean you have to. Monitoring and replying at any time of the day or night sets up an expectation that you will always do so.

- We encourage staff to establish "professional office hours" and share them with students and parents so that they know if and when you will respond to questions that are posted on social media.
- Linking to a social media disclaimer is useful in informing the public of the general monitoring of the account. Office hours should be available on your professional social media accounts, e.g. on your Twitter biography, and be strictly adhered to. *See link to sample Twitter bio and disclaimer at the end of this document.*
- Student safety and supervision is a top priority. Staff can post to social media during the instructional day, only if it is for educational purposes and if student safety can be maintained.

8. Maintenance and monitoring responsibilities

At the discretion of the school principal, school social media accounts may be run by one or more school staff members. Communication sent out via social media accounts should have a consistent voice and be positive in tone.

It is important that staff who create their own personal, professional, classroom and/or school social media accounts monitor these accounts with some regularity, at a frequency determined by them. This means that individual staff members are responsible for the accounts they maintain. Just like school websites, some accounts may be more extensive and more frequently updated than others based on school priorities. Best practice, however, would be that an official school account be updated regularly. If possible, even five minutes a day spent on an account ensures it is considered active and effective.

Many social media experts believe that logging into accounts once a day, if even for five minutes, is advisable. In this way, you can remove posts that are inappropriate and contrary to the Peel District School Board's [Digital Citizenship Policy #78](#) and the school's Code of Conduct.

As well, you are able to respond to questions in a way that is helpful to members of the Peel board community.

- Posts and comments of an inappropriate nature or that contain personal or irrelevant information should be removed/deleted promptly, if permitted by the tool.
- In some cases, it may be necessary to report a post or comment to an administrator for investigation. Please use your professional judgment in this regard. If you would report a behaviour if it happened at school, you should report similar online behaviour.
- Set your privacy settings so that you are notified if you are tagged or mentioned in photos or posts. Remove tags that may reflect negatively on you.
- Forward social media notifications to your email so that you can see what is being said about you online without logging into your social media accounts.

9. Duty of care

- There are concerns about personal duty of care in terms of monitoring social media when a student identifies that he or she is in crisis. All of the expectations and duties of educators apply with respect to conduct, responding to a child in need of protection or in crisis, as well as policies and procedures generally, and specifically regarding bullying, or activities that would be actionable through progressive discipline.
- While we know staff and administrators are always vigilant with respect to students in crisis, it is important for the safety of students and legal liability that we clearly state the supports that should and should not be expected through social media.
- There is no expectation that a school, classroom, department or personal social media account is monitored 24/7. It is important that we communicate that to potential users. School accounts must have a social media disclaimer—a paragraph or two that defines when the account is monitored and what to do if help is needed. *See link to sample Twitter bio and disclaimer appended to these guidelines.*

10. Staff supervision

- Staff use of social media is still subject to the rules of a school and their professional responsibilities. If for example, a staff member chooses to read a book during student supervision, you would intervene and make them aware of their responsibilities. The same is true for social media use that puts student safety at risk.
- Of course, staff can post to social media during the instructional day. Generally, this activity would focus on communicating classroom work, and building positive relationships with school audiences. Alternately, staff may post non-school-related content to their personal accounts on their own time. At all times, however, student safety must be maintained. We recognize that some staff members may choose to post outside of the regular school day.

Additional resources

- Peel District School Board – [Digital Citizenship Policy #78](#)
- Peel District School Board – [School Website, Internet and Intranet Posting Operating Procedure COMS 7](#)
- Peel District School Board – [Twitter Guidelines for School/Classroom Accounts](#)
- Peel District School Board – [Template letter to inform parents about ways social media will be used in the classroom to support learning](#)
- Peel District School Board – [Twitter Permission Form](#)
- Peel District School Board – [Sample Twitter bio and disclaimer](#)
- Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario – [Electronic Communication and Social Media: Advice to Members](#)
- Ontario College of Teachers – [Professional Advisory: Use of electronic communication and social media](#)
- Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation of Ontario – [Using Social Media Safely](#)

ⁱ *R. v. Audet* [1996] 2 S.C.R. 171; *Ross v. New Brunswick School District No. 15* [1996] 1 S.C.R. 825; and *Toronto (City) Board of Education v. OSSTF* [1997] 1 S.C.R. 487.