



APPROPRIATE AND PROFESSIONAL USE OF ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND ONLINE EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

A guide for members

Introduction

Electronic communication has become ubiquitous in our personal and professional lives. Where once the Association's advice to teachers would have been to avoid the online world, this is no longer feasible or beneficial – instead, teachers must be able to harness the potential of the internet and digital tools, while maintaining privacy, professionalism, and work/life balance. This guide provides practical advice to help teachers make appropriate use of various media.

Questions about specific situations should be directed to your local OECTA unit or the Counselling and Member Services department at the OECTA Provincial Office: 1.800.268.7230 or contact@catholicteachers.ca.

Email

We use email regularly to communicate with our family and friends, to conduct personal business, and to communicate with colleagues or our employer. However, when it comes to communicating with parents and students, teachers are advised to carefully consider your use of email.

There are a number of potential pitfalls of which you should be aware.

- The relative informality of email can erode appropriate professional boundaries.
- Email creates a permanent record – this may be helpful in some cases where clarity is required, but also could be used against you if a student or parent raises an issue or makes a complaint.
- Email messages can be forged or manipulated.
- Messages intended for one person can easily be forwarded to a wider audience.
- Email can be impersonal, incomplete, and/or misunderstood, making it a poor way to communicate complex or sensitive information.
- Because email is available to most people anytime, anywhere, there can be an unreasonable expectation that you will respond to messages immediately or outside of work hours – the temptation to reply at any time of day could potentially reinforce this expectation.
- Some households do not have computers, smartphones, or reliable internet connection. Using email as a primary form of communication with students or parents could create equity issues.

If you do choose to use email, be sure to maintain your professionalism and take appropriate precautions to protect your reputation.

- Only use your school board email address.*
- Only send or respond to email at school during regular work hours.
- Only send or respond to messages about legitimate school business.
- Where a more detailed or sensitive conversation needs to take place, use email only to set up a face-to-face meeting or phone conversation, and follow-up with key points covered in the conversation.

- Use formal language and sentence structure, with proper spelling and grammar.
- Use an email signature with your name, assignment title, and school name.
- Never share your login credentials.
- Keep a copy of each message you send or receive.
- Do not discuss other students or families, colleagues, or administrators.
- Do not send unnecessary attachments.
- Do not rely on email as your only form of communication.

Failure to maintain professional boundaries and demeanour when using email could result in investigation and possible discipline by the employer, the Ontario College of Teachers, the Children's Aid Society, or even the police.

You should also be aware of your school board's policy with regard to the employer's access to your email messages. Although you generally have a reasonable expectation of privacy, there are situations in which your employer might be permitted to read messages sent or received using your school board email address or school equipment.

**While you should use your school board email address for all of your job-related communications, please note that OECTA will not use school board email addresses to communicate with members. Please ensure that you have provided a personal email address to the Association to receive important local and provincial information about collective bargaining, Association events, political issues, and more.*

Text Messaging

In our personal lives, email is increasingly being replaced by even more informal forms of communication, such as text messaging. However, due to the difficulties in maintaining professional tone and boundaries, and because it requires you to provide your personal phone number, the Association advises this is not an appropriate way for teachers to communicate with students or parents.

The same is true of other communication apps, such as Skype, WhatsApp, Signal, Viber, etc., which are generated through your personal electronic devices.

This advice does not preclude use of group messaging apps. See the section below on Online Educational Services.

Social Media

OECTA is active on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, and members are encouraged to use social media as a means of growing your professional networks and advocating for the Association, publicly funded education, and the broader labour and social justice movements. However, teachers need to exercise discretion in what you choose to post, who you choose to friend or follow, and how you interact.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that anything you do on social media is, or could become, public – including chats or direct messages you intend only for select recipients. Teachers are individual citizens who are entitled to personal lives, political views, and diverse interests, but what appears on your social media accounts must be appropriate to your position as a teacher and role model for young people.

Misuse of social media could have consequences for your professional reputation or employment, including discipline before the Ontario College of Teachers. The Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that even off-duty conduct is relevant to your suitability to teach.

The following are some basic guidelines to keep in mind.

- Share stories and information only from credible sources.
- Present your thoughts or opinions in reasonable language, without profanity or personal attacks.
- Do not share photos of yourself in inappropriate or compromising situations.
- Be careful what you say about your employer, colleagues, school, or students.
- Be aware that the common disclaimers used on social media – for example, “opinions are mine and do not reflect my employer,” or “retweets are not endorsements” – have no legal basis and will not protect you in case of a complaint or investigation.

Be careful who you friend or follow on social media. Do not follow people or accounts that are known to espouse racist, sexist, homophobic or otherwise bigoted views, or who post otherwise offensive or inappropriate content.

Be aware of what others are posting about you. Ask family and friends not to post undesirable content about you, and request that they not tag you in photos without your permission. Monitor your own posts for inappropriate comments.

Do not friend or follow students or parents on your personal social media accounts. Wherever possible, make your accounts private, meaning that others need to request

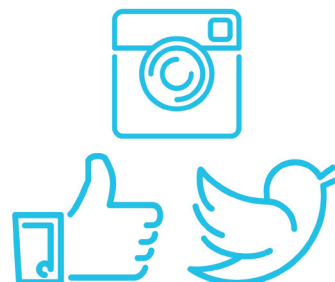
permission to friend or follow you. Do not grant this permission to students or parents.

If you are assigning work in your classroom that requires access to social media sites (e.g. YouTube), ensure you are aware of your school board’s policy on the use of social media in the classroom. Such activities should be topic-specific and teacher-guided wherever possible.

While social media can be a great way to share exciting things happening in our classrooms or schools (usually from a designated class or school account), you must be careful to respect the privacy of students and colleagues.

- Seek permission to post photos of others. In the case of students, this must be written consent from parents/guardians (or the students themselves, if they are age 18 or over).
 - Many schools or school boards have parents/guardians/students fill out consent forms, but you must get your own consent to use photos of students for your own use.
 - There are predators who seek images of young people online. There are also complicated family situations in which a student could be put in danger if their image and/or location is disclosed.
 - In most cases, it is best to err on the side of caution and not share photos of students.
- Avoid disclosing too much information about your class. For example, you can post the name of your classroom, but do not disclose your city or school board. Alternatively, post the name of your school, but do not disclose your city or school board.
- Exercise caution when posting students’ work.
 - Students are creators of their work and thus are entitled to protect their intellectual property. Check the terms of use for the website/app to ensure that copyright will be retained, and seek permission from the student or their parent/guardian to post the work.
 - Never share students’ work in a manner that might embarrass them or make them vulnerable to ridicule.
 - Never share students’ work when it contains personal information about the student, or could be used to identify a particular student.

A social media “how to” guide is available at catholicteachers.ca. Here you will find valuable tips and tricks on how to set up an account, maintain a private and secure identity, and participate in a positive and constructive manner





Internet Browsing

As long as your internet browsing activities are legal, private, and carried out on your personal devices and time, you should not have a problem.

But there are different expectations during work hours, especially when you are using school board computers or devices, or using the employer's internet connection. Your use of the internet should be related to your work as a teacher and should not put your reputation or your employer's reputation at risk. The following are some activities that could result in disciplinary action:

- Visiting inappropriate websites (e.g. those featuring adult content or that are known to espouse racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise offensive views).
- Posting suggestive or inappropriate pictures.
- Online gambling.
- Downloading materials in violation of copyright laws.
- Activities related to another job or business.
- Constant instant messaging or emailing during work time.
- Visiting websites not related to curriculum or pedagogy.

Exercise caution when allowing students to browse the internet.

- If assigning work that requires the use of websites or internet searches, the activities should be topic-specific and teacher-guided wherever possible.

- Explore any sites before allowing students to use them.
 - Consider content and/or age-appropriateness.
 - Check if the Ministry of Education or the school board has approved the site.

Personal Mobile Phones in the Classroom

In the classroom, you are expected to maintain the highest level of professionalism. You should not be using your personal cellphone to conduct personal business. Checking personal messages or responding to a personal call could distract from your teaching duties and/or potentially create an unsafe environment for students.

You also should not use your personal mobile phone to collect, distribute, or store photos, videos, or personal information related to students. Nor should you use your personal mobile phone to communicate with parents. Any of these actions could violate the privacy rights of students and parents. You are advised to review board policies as well as privacy legislation in order to protect yourself from liability.

In addition to the privacy issues, having photos and videos of students on your personal cellphone can lead to allegations that suggest an inappropriate relationship. If students are expected to abide by strict guidelines regarding the use of mobile devices in the classroom, teachers should be respecting that by maintaining professionalism in your own use of these devices.

Online Educational Services

There are a variety of websites, software, or apps that can enhance your teaching practice, including in the areas of assessment, evaluation, reporting, or communication. However, teachers must be sure to maintain proper boundaries, respect students' privacy rights, and protect against excessive workload.

The Association recommends the following guidelines:

- Communication between teachers and parents or students should only take place via software or applications sanctioned by the school board or the Ministry of Education – teachers should never use personal devices or accounts.
- Communication with parents should only be done during the instructional day.
- Teachers must always abide by the Ontario College of Teachers' Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession. The focus of any communication should be on the assessment/evaluation/report being communicated, not personal communication.
- All matters and materials electronically communicated are bound by the *Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, which states that unless explicit consent is given, all information is to be kept confidential.
- There is no expectation for a teacher to constantly check software or applications for notifications of new communications. (If you believe you are being instructed otherwise, contact your local OECTA unit.)
- If you are sharing announcements and general information through a third party application, you should ensure it is a one-way communication. If ongoing communication is required, then use of email and phone to set up an appointment is the best course of action.

Privacy is a key consideration when selecting any software or app.

- You must take reasonable steps to protect students' personal information, including their work, progress reports, and evaluations.
- You must ensure the online educational services you use do not improperly collect, use, and disclose personal information.

- As with social media, you should seek consent from students or their parents/guardians before posting any photographs. It is best to err on the side of caution and avoid posting identifiable photos of students altogether.
- To protect yourself, consult with the school or school board about which websites, software, or applications have been approved for use in your classroom.

Many of the popular online educational services fail to meet the Association's guidelines. You should examine and test any tool before you use it in your classroom.

If you choose to use an online service, the Association recommends Desire2Learn's Virtual Learning Environment, which has been licensed by the Ministry of Education for every publicly funded school board in Ontario.

- The tool supports pedagogical documentation, so you can review and evaluate students' work, and provide feedback to students and parents.
- Students' information is kept secure and private.
- The Ministry of Education has already purchased these licenses – the Association's position is that school boards should not be spending additional resources on other services.
- For more information, see www.d2l.com/k-12/ontario/

For more information about how to integrate technology into your teaching practice effectively, check out OECTA's wide range of professional development programs at catholicteachers.ca in the classroom resource section.



E-learning

E-learning is an established part of Ontario's publicly funded education system. With the proper equipment, conditions, and supports, it can be an effective way to deliver curriculum and give students access to a range of course options.

The Association's position on e-learning is:

- E-learning should not be a replacement for classroom instruction.
- Only a minority of students succeed using e-learning – generally students who are already self-motivated and high-achieving.
- Not all students have access to the proper equipment or a reliable internet connection.
- It is challenging to build classroom communities, foster relationships, and develop Catholic values.

If you are teaching an e-learning course, many of the same guidelines for electronic communications apply. Also:

- A teacher should have a choice as to whether you teach an e-learning course.
- E-learning day courses should be delivered during the instructional day.
- Communication with students and parents should be sent during the instructional day, and relate only to the course material or student progress.

If you have questions about how e-learning works in your local school board and/or the provisions related to e-learning contained in your local collective agreement, contact your local OECTA unit. Unit contact information can be found at catholicteachers.ca.



Copyright

Teachers are subject to the “fair dealing” provisions of the federal *Copyright Act*, meaning you are allowed to use short excerpts from copyrighted works for educational purposes.

There are precise legal conditions regarding when and how you can use copyrighted works. For further guidance, see the resources provided by the Canadian Teachers' Federation at www.ctf-fce.ca/en/Pages/Issues/Copyright.aspx.

There are exceptions to fair use rights for educators. For example, you have likely committed copyright infringement if:

- You use copyrighted works for reasons other than to support curriculum delivery.
- The use does not take place during school hours or on school premises.
- The resource is obtained illegally.
- You intend to make a profit.

It is also important to remember that students own their work.

- Obtain consent from students (or their parents or guardians) if you intend to publicly display their work.
- If you are posting the work online, check the terms and conditions of the website or app to ensure that the student will not be surrendering their copyright.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is the use of electronic devices and digital tools to embarrass, humiliate, torment, threaten, or harass. It can be even more dangerous or harmful than face-to-face bullying, because it can be anonymous, relentless, sustained over a long period, and reach an incredibly wide audience.

Students are becoming increasingly vulnerable to cyberbullying. Teachers can also be victims of cyberbullying.

Take the necessary precautions to protect yourself from cyberbullying.

- Never share your personal information with students.
- Use the privacy settings on your social media accounts, and do not friend or follow students. (Check the privacy and security settings frequently, as these can change without notice.)
- Do not leave yourself logged in to any online account on a school board computer or other device.

If you are being cyberbullied, take appropriate steps to document and report it.

- Demand that the sender(s) cease posting about or contacting you. *Do not engage with them any further, as this may escalate the situation.*

- Make copies of the offensive messages, posts, or other materials.
- Report the matter to school administration.
- Contact your local OECTA unit.
- If the matter is serious, report it to the police.

You may also encounter situations in which you discover that students are being cyberbullied. As a teacher, you have a legal obligation to address and report these incidents.

- You are required to respond to any incident that could have a negative impact on school climate – even when the incident(s) take place outside of the school or after the instructional day. This includes speaking to the students involved and/or reporting to school administration.
- If you believe a student under the age of 18 is in need of protection, you should contact the Children's Aid Society and/or the police.



Useful resources

Ontario College of Teachers

Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession

www.oct.ca/public/professional-standards/ethical-standards

Maintaining Professionalism: Use of Electronic Communications and Social Media

www.oct.ca/resources/advisories/use-of-electronic-communication-and-social-media

Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario

A Guide to Privacy and Access to Information in Ontario Schools

www.ipc.on.ca/protecting-privacy-in-ontario-schools/

Online Educational Services: What Educators Need to Know

www.ipc.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/online-educational-services.pdf

Canadian Teachers' Federation

Cybertips for teachers

www.ctf-fce.ca/en/Pages/Issues/Cybertips-for-teachers.aspx

Copyright: Professional knowledge on key issues affecting education

www.ctf-fce.ca/en/Pages/Issues/Copyright.aspx

OECTA

Professional Development

www.catholicteachers.ca/For-Your-Classroom

Reporting Abuse: Teachers and the Child, Youth and Family Protection Act

www.catholicteachers.ca/OECTA/media/pdfs/Professional%20Advice/Teacher%20Adviser%20-%20Joe%20Pece/2018/Report-Abuse-Broch18.pdf

What You Need to Know: Your Duties to Respond and Report

www.catholicteachers.ca/OECTA/media/pdfs/Communications/OECTA%20Publications/2017/safety_in_schools_aug29.pdf

Desire2Learn – Virtual Learning Environment

www.d2l.com/k-12/ontario/

MediaSmarts – Canada's Centre for Media and Digital Literacy

mediasmarts.ca/

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