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Appleton Area School District to develop new policy

By Megan Nicolai Post-Crescent staff writer March 14, 2012



"Freshman Sydney Wayner uses Edmodo, a secure and educational social networking website, during a biophysical science class last month at Appleton West High School. Many Appleton area teachers view social media as a tool to connect with students outside of the classroom. - Wm. Glasheen/The Post-Crescent

Teachers in the Appleton area are plugging into Facebook and Twitter to connect with students, but being "friends" with a student on social media sites is still a gray area for many educators.

Social media blunders have ended teaching careers across the country. For example, a football coach in Maine resigned after inadvertently posting a nude photo on his public Facebook page instead of sending a private message to a friend. A parent in the school district notified school officials after seeing the photo.

"This is very new territory for teachers," said Brian Bartel, a science teacher at Appleton West High School. "Some people tread really lightly with it."

The Appleton Area School District has yet to develop specific rules on social media communication between teachers and students, but hopes to develop one soon, said Judy Baseman, an assistant superintendent. The current guideline, written in 2006, governs telecommunication in the classroom. It was issued two years after Facebook's launch and the same year Twitter made its debut.

Baseman said anything posted online that disrupts the school environment is open to investigation by the district's administrative staff and can lead to possible disciplinary action, including dismissal. Teachers are told to be wary of what they post online -- even on their personal pages or accounts. Posting information on a private account doesn't mean a student or parent within the school district won't see it.

But despite the potential pratfalls, many teachers say social media sites have become too pervasive for schools to ignore.

"I can send an update, and students will see my message within minutes," Bartel said. "You can see the power of that."

Many teachers view social media as a tool to connect with students outside of the classroom. Both Appleton East and West high schools have a Facebook page and a Twitter account, mainly used to send announcements to parents and students on upcoming events or school closures.

Bartel, who monitors several school-related Facebook groups and is "friends" with several students, says some teachers will ask students to tweet about an event or hold class discussions on a Facebook page.

But he said there is nothing on his Facebook page that he wouldn't mention in class.

Dale Basler, a science teacher at Appleton East High School, has allowed his students to tweet about their field trip experiences at sites like the Argonne National Laboratory in Illinois. The laboratory, which has its own Twitter feed, interacted with students online, he said.

But Basler shies away from using Facebook, noting the risk isn't worth the reward.

"Just because many of our students are on Facebook doesn't mean it's the best environment for education," he said. "(It's) distracting. (It's) not the best place to learn."

As an alternative to Facebook, many teachers are using school district-approved social media sites such as Moodle or Edmodo that are intended specifically for education. The Kaukauna, Kimberly, Little Chute, Menasha and Neenah school districts all prefer the use of education-based social media sites.

Bartel uses Edmodo to post assignments, engage students in coursework discussions and hold quizzes and polls. The free website operates like Facebook, making the transition easy for students and teachers alike. The site also has a mobile application, so students can get updates on discussions and access assignments from their smartphones.

The district-approved social media sites can only be accessed with a password so the content cannot be viewed publicly, but school administrators reserve the right to review discussions and classwork at any time.

Alicia St. Marie, a student in Bartel's freshman biophysics class, said she liked being able to view her assignments online and have access anywhere.

"It's just another tool teachers can use in classes," she said.

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