

Social Media

The Good – The Bad & The Ugly

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Social Media has become an intricate part of everyday life and words such as, *Tweet, Snap, Share, Upload* and *Followers* have totally different meanings today than when many educators grew up. Education, however, has embraced social media and it's utilized in multiple ways from communicating with parents, to celebrating athletic victories and even as a means of teaching students. A teacher's digital footprint today may be more important than their resume because it is seen daily in the court of public opinion. Because of this, improper use of social media, even if it is well-meaning, and then misunderstood, has the potential to damage the teacher's as well as the school's reputation and substantially disrupt the educational environment as well as causing problems that may be even more severe. Student issues can be even more intense as students are "digital natives" and social media is deeply ingrained in their lives. The movie, "The Social Network," had a great line in it spoken by actor, Justin Timberlake. Near the end of the movie in describing Facebook he decreed, "*We lived on farms, we lived in cities, and now we are going to live on the Internet!*"

This line is so true for many people connected across the globe today. Social Media is a part of the world we live in and schools must address it through policies, contracts and handbooks. It cannot be ignored, and schools must also be mindful of the First and Fourteenth Amendments which are not, "Shed at the schoolhouse gate" (Tinker v. Des Moines). For the purposes of this paper, a number of subjects connected to Social Media will be addressed. The Title of the paper, "Social Media – The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly," is also a good roadmap to outline the multiple issues schools must navigate and address in today's social world.

Social Media has a place in schools and can be used for a host of positive gains for all members of the school community. Academic achievement via Social Media is limited only to the creativity of the teacher. Connections can be made online that can be great motivators and engaging for academic gains such as an elementary teacher from Howard-Winneshiek, so vividly displayed. To

engage her students and expand their thinking, her 5th grade class created a Twitter handle reaching out to schools across the globe asking a class from another country (who spoke English) to become pen-pals with them. It wasn't long before another 5th grade class in Montreal, Quebec reached out. The students in Montreal were wanting to improve their English speaking and writing skills. For the remainder of the school year, weekly contact was made over Skype and Google Docs were used for the students to share their writing. It was super exciting! Friendships were formed, cultures and languages shared, writing improved and it all started with Twitter.

Twitter is an effective communication tool in the hands of principal Jason Klein (@CRKennedyHigh) from Kennedy High School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Mr. Klein is continually sending out positive messages, encouragements, information, shout outs and educational challenges. This weekend he shared a blog for principals and teachers, "Insane in the Membrane," declaring it a very good read. Of course, there are many outstanding educators who do the same, but it was impressive how he went over and above during the Derecho storm on August 10th when Cedar Rapids was totally devastated by hurricane-type winds. Kennedy High School sustained the worst damage of all the schools and the majority of the city was without power for days. From the moment cell phone coverage was possible, Jason was tweeting out information on where to get water, food, supplies, medical attention, as well as sharing positive messages like, "We will get through this together!" It's important to note that Mr. Klein was chosen by a member of the cohort for a previous assignment, "Tweet Like a Leader."

Administrative leadership can greatly benefit from the communication advantages Social Media offers. The first and most obvious is for weather and school closings which was extremely helpful this year as schools would open and close sporadically. Many schools take advantage of Facebook and have their teachers create classroom sites where they can invite only the parents of their students to join. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and the list goes on can also be utilized to share

out the football team's win or the next school play. "Social Media connections have been shown to increase educators' credibility and foster positive student attitudes, engagement, trust and confidence" (Botty HMRH, Taha HZHM, Shahrill M., Mahadi MA; Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences). These avenues are a great way for a school to "tell their story" and create a brand for the school that could entice people to move to the district, help pass bond issues and further create the positive climate and culture that all schools strive for.

Schools and technology go together like peanut butter goes with jelly and it is not going to change in the future but will more than likely become more complex. As the industrial mode of education evolves into future-ready schools, schools must address all topics related to technology for both staff and students. The first consideration that needs to be addressed is the First Amendment as outlined in the Constitution.

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Freedom of speech in public schools made national news and set precedent in the famous court case from Iowa, "Tinker v. Des Moines." The courts ruled that the three students wearing black armbands in protest of the Vietnam War, were denied their freedom of expression because wearing the armbands did not cause or create a reasonable forecast of "substantial disruption" (American Public School Law, Alexander, pg. 467). This court case is foundational for schools when creating policies regarding Social Media as students and teachers do not leave their "First and Fourteenth Amendment rights at the schoolhouse door" (Tinker v. Des Moines). However, freedom of speech is no longer free when a substantial disruption creates a "nexus" or crosses over into the school environment. Determining this "nexus" has become increasingly broad as Social Media, connected

through students and staff' cell phones and computers is a part of our culture's daily life. Especially now, as the schoolhouse gate has become the mode of education through online learning.

First Amendment rights were discussed with several superintendents in preparation for this paper and it was very interesting to discover that, "The Bad," issues that can arise from Social Media use took many forms. One of surprising issues discovered was that well-meaning teachers, in efforts to encourage and cheer on their students, have tweeted out inspirational quotes that were copyrighted. One school was actually sued because a coach did not quote the author. Sadly, this cost the school money in lawyer fees and a small settlement. The coach felt terrible for this bad mistake.

Another bad mistake made by educators revealed during these conversations was that teachers need to understand that their spouses and even children's digital media footprint can also reflect poorly on them. Darwin Lehmann, Forest City Superintendent, shared that he would almost like to bring in the spouses or significant others of new teachers to their in-service to explain that everything they put out on Social Media can reflect on the new teacher, which in turn can affect the school. Educators have First Amendment rights, but again, the court of public opinion typically does not believe in innocent until proven guilty. A good example of this relates back to the Des Moines Community School District's superintendent and his wife's posts. These posts made the news outside of Social Media and depending on personal political views, reflected directly on him as the posts about her dislike for the governor spread like wildfire across Social Media. Examples such as this are countless, but the critical point is that schools must address the use of Social Media and provide guidance to every member of the school community.

School Administrators' of Iowa, SAI, provides Social Media guidance through attorney, Matt Carver, J.D., Legal Services Director. Mr. Carver posted guidance, under the title, "Staff Use of Technology & Interaction with Students." Regarding staff personal social networking and technology use, "It is recommended that employee handbooks, work rules and master contracts

address the issues surrounding technology” (Matt Carver, SAI). These forms of legal communication to school employees must consider multiple uses of technology including but not limited to: school owned computers/laptops, acceptable use policies, use of Social Media during school hours, student communications, classroom websites, posting in official capacity of the school, newsletters, blogs, FERPA, confidentiality, political speech and the list goes on. In reviewing Des Moines Public Schools Social Media Guidelines, a favorite was a good rule to remember before posting anything, “Remember that behavior inappropriate in school or the classroom should be considered inappropriate online” (Des Moines CSD, Social Media Guidelines). This is critically important as we look into “The Ugly” of Social Media pitfalls, especially in regards to teacher and student communication.

The “ugliest” thing that can happen at school or on Social Media is an inappropriate relationship between a teacher and a student. The Cyberbullying Research Center cautions teachers from connecting with students via texting or through Social Media platforms. “The most serious potential risk involves educators failing to maintain proper boundaries, or students misperceiving the online attention they receive as something more than educational and platonic” (Connecting with Students Online, Hiduja and Patchin). People are human and are prone to weakness, and “If any man thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12) is a good word to live by. It is this very reason that schools make policies that do not allow staff members to “friend” or “follow” their students on Social Media because of the legal pitfalls that could ensue. Through these policies, the protection of both our educators and students is clear. Don’t do it! One needs only to type in a Google search with the words’ teacher, student and relationship and instantly over two billion responses pop up. Law, policies, handbooks and contracts are put in place for this very reason.

Matt Carver of SAI, advises from 282 Iowa Administrative Code 26.3(6) *“The educator shall not use professional relationships with students for personal advantage”* Iowa Administrative Code has a great deal

to say in the protection of students in regards to personal advantage. This ranges from having a student purchase equipment from a teacher to the sexual exploitation of a student. To outline these violations of these standards the following is an excerpt includes as taken from Matt Carver's paper, "Staff Use of Technology & Interaction with Students" as well as Iowa Administrative Code:

- 282 Iowa Administrative Code (IAC) 25.3(1) Standard 1 –*conviction of crimes, sexual or other immoral conduct with or toward a student, and child... Violation of this standard includes...*
- *e. Student abuse. Licensees shall maintain professional relationships with all students, both inside and outside the classroom. The following acts or behavior constitutes unethical conduct without regard to the existence of a criminal charge or conviction...*
- *(3) Committing or soliciting any sexual or otherwise indecent act with a student or any minor.*
- *(4) Soliciting encouraging, or consummating a romantic or otherwise inappropriate relationship with a student.*

Furthermore Chapter 25 regarding teacher ethics has additional warnings:

- 282 IAC 25.3(6) Standard VI –*unethical practice toward other members of the profession, parents, students, and the community. Violation of this standard includes...*
- *d. Conducting professional business in such a way that the practitioner repeatedly exposes students or other practitioners to unnecessary embarrassment or disparagement.*

The staff member who engages in any type of this behavior will more than likely lose their teaching license, at the very least, and may in fact be facing jail time.

- In 282 IAC 11.37, "*AEA and school boards of directors, superintendents, AEA chief administrator, and authorities in charge of nonpublic schools are required to file a report with the BoEE within 60 days of the date of local board action on the termination or resignation of the licensed employee due to misconduct or alleged misconduct that, if proven would violate 282 IAC 25.3(1)"b"(1), which concerns disqualifying criminal convictions.*"

The issues surrounding Social Media are vast and may be unexpected. It has been the experience of this author to witness the strengths of this venue as well as the incredible horrors that can ensue. One of the scariest stories that comes to mind happened several years ago, when one of the girls in a middle school where I was the Dean of Students, had been “friended” by a young man she believed was from the south. She had broken it off because it was, in her words, “getting creepy.” During this unforgettable day, the school had a new “student teacher” visiting the district from Mount Mercy University. This same student saw him and informed me that this was the same person she had been talking to over Facebook, and she was terrified. The police were immediately notified and upon further inspection in this man’s car trunk were handcuffs and rope. This scenario does not exactly fit into a teacher handbook or a board policy, but it does demonstrate how wide and varied the issue of Social Media can be and how important it is for schools to be aware and on top of all facets of this platform.

In closing, it is expected that Social Media, although it will evolve and change, will continue to be a part of the world of education. As this paper has outlined, Social Media has the potential to be “The Good,” “The Bad,” or “The Ugly.” The choice will be ours. School Districts and administrators must continue to stay current on this issue and put sound policies, practices and prevention tools in place to navigate this platform for the protection of their students, their staff and their district. Sameer Hinduja of the Cyberbullying Research Center states it well, “Instead of prohibiting good educators from utilizing all available tools to connect with their students, encourage specific learning tasks, and promote the healthy development of youth focus should be placed on informing both students and staff about appropriate boundaries and keep the discussion interaction professional at all times (Hinduja, Connecting with Students Online).