



# Internet Safety and Responsibility

## Protect Yourself and Career on the Internet

“Never put in electronic form anything that you wouldn’t want viewed by a million people, including your colleagues, students, and supervisors—and your mother.”

—Michael D. Simpson, NEA Office of General Counsel

With the rise of technology, educators have many new opportunities to use the internet to communicate in ways we never thought possible. However, with new technology comes pitfalls. As a school employee, you must exercise extreme caution when you engage in blogging or other forms of internet communication.

In fact, future teachers need to take action to protect their careers and reputations well before they start their first teaching job, starting with the day they open a social network account. What you post on the internet as a teenager or college student may prevent you from getting the job you want someday.

Keep in mind that your First Amendment rights can be limited by virtue of your position as a school employee. The general rule is that school employees can be disciplined for off-duty conduct if the school district can show that the conduct had an adverse impact on the school or the teacher’s ability to teach. And it

wouldn't be too difficult to make that showing if the teacher's blog includes sexually explicit or other inappropriate content and is widely viewed by students.

Consequences can be severe, from a written reprimand to a suspension or termination of employment to suspension or revocation of one's teaching license.

### **U.S. Supreme Court Decision**

#### **Garcetti et al v. Ceballos**

*When public employees make statements pursuant to their official duties, they are not speaking as citizens for First Amendment purposes, and the Constitution does not insulate their communications from employer discipline.*

### **Internet Protection Tips for Prospective Educators**

- What you post on the internet is, for all intents and purposes, there forever. If you have questionable content on the internet, by all means remove it NOW. Be wary, though, that once you have removed content from the internet, it might still be there preserved by an image—capturing the historical documentation site which takes daily screen captures of random sites on any given date and time. Also, removing something from the internet doesn't mean someone else hasn't printed it or taken a screenshot and saved it prior to your removing it.
- Minimize the risk associated with internet communications by limiting access to your blog, social network, or website page using a "friends only" or similar restrictive setting. If you are using Facebook, review the privacy options and choose the most restrictive ones. This will make sure only trusted individuals can see the information you are posting. Use extreme caution when "friending" relatives or other individuals who may have connections to students. You may need to revise their access privileges to your site or social network while you have students connected to them in your school.

- Don't "friend" students and NEVER GIVE A STUDENT ACCESS TO YOUR SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES. Most districts have policies or directives that prohibit staff from inviting or accepting invitations from students to be "friends" on a social network. Check your district's policies and make sure your internet habits are in compliance with them. As social networks become more integrated into daily life and learning, some schools are starting to allow the use of social network sites for maintaining a classroom community. If you are in a district which allows this, make certain to maintain separate networks for your personal life and your classes—and never allow the two to commingle.
- If visitors can post to your blog or Web page, monitor postings constantly and remove any that are inappropriate. Better yet, most blogging sites give blog authors and administrators the ability to review and approve blog comments before they are posted. We recommend you use this option if it is available to you.
- Do not blog or post about your job duties, colleagues, supervisors, or students even in passing. This will reduce the danger that you might disclose confidential information, share information about a private workplace complaint, or otherwise carelessly or unintentionally engage in speech which could affect your future employment.
- If you choose to blog or post as a citizen about a non-job-related matter of public concern (e.g. elections, terrorism, or environmental issues), take care that what you say will not impede your employer's effectiveness or efficiency or otherwise disrupt the workplace.
- If you are blogging or posting about innocuous information (e.g. your favorite football team or family genealogy), you still must be careful not to engage in comments that could adversely affect your employer (i.e. damage the employer's reputation) or interfere with your ability to carry out your job duties.
- Do not blog or post about personal subjects (e.g. dating, romance, or drug or alcohol use). Your blog or Web page should not contain any references to sexual subjects, or contain vulgar, graphic, or profane language. If your blog or Web page were a movie, it should be rated "G."
- Blogging and posting anonymously does not protect you. Names of bloggers, Web page authors, and other internet users can be discovered through litigation.
- Be very careful about posting pictures of yourself or family on the internet. Scrutinize every photo before deciding to post it. Avoid party photos. If others have tagged you in questionable photos on their social networks or websites, ask them to remove them immediately. On Facebook, you also have the option of

blocking the tags identifying you, even on someone else's page. If you are allowed to maintain a site or social media profile for classroom purposes, before posting any student photos, make sure you follow district procedures and/or seek written permission from those in photos before posting them.

*Disclaimer: This document is not meant to be comprehensive or a substitute for common sense when using social networking sites, and it is not intended to provide legal advice. For additional information, members should contact their UniServ Director.*