

OECTA Advisor

Real life situations and solutions

By Joe Pece

Increasingly, the calls that we receive from teachers who have found themselves in difficult situations have an element of electronic communication gone wrong. As communications technology advances and devices become more accessible to students, we see the use of Facebook, Twitter and texting by teachers on the rise. Teachers are using various technologies in their classrooms and subsequently, are communicating with parents and students through a variety of digital mediums, both during and after the school day. These practices can have a negative impact on a teacher's professional career if the necessary precautions are not taken.

Texting is becoming a dominant form of communication for students and many educators feel that texting is an effective method to engage students. The expansion of the software application or "app" market has also led to increased possibilities for teachers to utilize texting as a form of communication. Recently I was asked about a seemingly great app developed for teachers called REMIND 101. The app is marketed as providing a safe way for teachers to text message students and stay in touch with parents, but is it?

The developers claim that the app cannot be misused because the communication is to a group, not individuals. They also claim that students and parents cannot reply to the teacher, and therefore, bullying or favouritism is prevented.

Although there may be some positive aspects to the REMIND 101 app, teachers should always be cautious about the electronic communications they send to students and parents. The Ontario College of Teachers' professional advisory on social media emphasizes that teachers must maintain a professional standard in all their written communications and cautions against texting to individual students, as it can be interpreted as a violation of student-teacher boundaries.



It is important that teachers evaluate the benefits and the potential pitfalls before deciding to utilize any new technology or application.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Interactions with students, parents, colleagues and administrators are always under scrutiny. Consider whether your use of texting will lead to casual or familiar language and an erosion of professional boundaries.
- Digital files can be saved, copied, printed, or shared with a wider audience than originally intended, and they are likely to be seen out-of-context, which increases the possibility of misunderstanding and potential liability.
- Many boards may have their own policy regarding the use of electronic communications and social media by their staff. Make sure you are aware of any board policies that govern your behaviour in this regard.
- Be aware of the possibility of increased expectations and workload that could arise. For example, should you be unable to send a text reminder, it is very possible that you will be criticized for not fulfilling a promised expectation.
- Consider the impact on student learning. Would your use of texting disadvantage any students who are not able to receive texts from you? Are you diminishing opportunities for students to build and demonstrate essential learning skills around responsibility, accountability and time management?

The former CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt once said:

"The Internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn't understand, the largest experiment in anarchy that we have ever had."

Using these new technologies inappropriately can expose teachers to risk when it comes to maintaining professionalism, even when students initiate the electronic interaction. Read the Ontario College of Teachers' professional advisory on *Use of Electronic Communication and Social Media* and review OECTA's social media podcast series, both available at www.oecta.on.ca to ensure that you maintain professional boundaries with students at all times.

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