

POLICY

WASHINGTON TOWNSHIP BOARD OF EDUCATION

TEACHING STAFF MEMBERS

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Electronic Communications Between Teaching Staff
Members and Students

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3283 ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS BETWEEN TEACHING STAFF MEMBERS AND STUDENTS

The Board of Education recognizes electronic communications and the use of social media outlets create new options for extending and enhancing the educational program of the school district. Electronic communications and the use of social media can help students and teaching staff members communicate regarding questions during non-school hours regarding homework or other assignments; scheduling issues for school-related co-curricular and interscholastic athletic activities; school work to be completed during a student's extended absence; distance learning opportunities; and other professional communications that can enhance teaching and learning opportunities between teaching staff members and students. However, the Board of Education recognizes teaching staff members can be vulnerable in electronic communications with students.

In accordance with the provisions of N.J.S.A. 18A:36-40, the Board of Education adopts this Policy to provide guidance and direction to teaching staff members to prevent improper electronic communications between teaching staff members and students.

The Commissioner of Education and arbitrators, appointed by the Commissioner, have determined inappropriate conduct may determine a teaching staff member unfit to discharge the duties and functions of their position. Improper electronic communications by teaching staff members may be determined to be inappropriate conduct.

For the purposes of this Policy, "electronic communication" means a communication transmitted by means of an electronic device including, but not limited to, a telephone, cellular telephone, computer, computer network, personal data assistant, or pager. "Electronic communications" include, but are not limited to, e-mails, text messages, instant messages, and communications made by means of an Internet website, including social media and social networking websites.

For the purposes of this Policy, "professional responsibility" means a teaching staff member's responsibilities regarding co-curricular, athletic coaching, and any other instructional or non-instructional responsibilities assigned to the teaching staff member by the administration or Board of Education.

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For the purposes of this Policy, "improper electronic communications" means an electronic communication between a teaching staff member and any student of the school district when:

1. The content of the communication is inappropriate as defined in this Policy; and/or
2. The manner in which the electronic communication is made is not in accordance with acceptable protocols for electronic communications between a teaching staff member and a student as defined in this Policy.

Inappropriate content of an electronic communication between a teaching staff member and a student includes, but is not limited to:

1. Communications of a sexual nature, sexually oriented humor or language, sexual advances, or content with a sexual overtone;
2. Communications involving the use, encouraging the use, or promoting or advocating the use of alcohol or tobacco, the illegal use of prescription drugs or controlled dangerous substances, illegal gambling, or other illegal activities;
3. Communications regarding the teaching staff member's or student's past or current romantic relationships;
4. Communications which include the use of profanities, obscene language, lewd comments, or pornography;
5. Communications that are harassing, intimidating, or bullying;
6. Communications requesting or trying to establish a personal relationship with a student beyond the teaching staff member's professional responsibilities;
7. Communications related to personal or confidential information regarding another school staff member or student; and
8. Communications between the teaching staff member and a student that the Commissioner of Education or an arbitrator would determine to be inappropriate in determining the teaching staff member is unfit to discharge the duties and functions of their position.

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The following acceptable protocols for all electronic communications between a teaching staff member and a student shall be followed:

1. E-Mail Electronic Communications Between a Teaching Staff Member and a Student
 - a. All e-mails between a teaching staff member and a student must be sent or received through the school district's e-mail system. The content of all e-mails between a teaching staff member and a student shall be limited to the staff member's professional responsibilities regarding the student.
 - b. A teaching staff member shall not provide their personal e-mail address to any student. If a student sends an e-mail to a teaching staff member's personal e-mail address, the staff member shall respond to the e-mail through the school district e-mail system and inform the student his/her personal e-mail address shall not be used for any electronic communication between the teaching staff member and the student.
 - c. A teaching staff member's school district e-mail account is subject to review by authorized school district officials. Therefore, a teaching staff member shall have no expectation of privacy on the school district's e-mail system.
2. Cellular Telephone Electronic Communications Between a Teaching Staff Member and a Student
 - a. Communications between a teaching staff member and a student via a personal cellular telephone shall be prohibited.
 - (1) However, a teaching staff member may, with prior approval of the Principal or designee, communicate with a student using their personal cellular telephone if the need to communicate is directly related to the teaching staff member's professional responsibilities for a specific purpose such as a crisis (or potential crisis situation), field trip, athletic event, co-curricular activity, etc. Any such approval for cellular telephone communications shall not extend beyond the specific crisis (or potential crisis situation), a field trip, athletic event, co-curricular activity, etc. Any such approval for cellular telephone communications shall not extend beyond the specific field trip, athletic event, co-curricular activity, etc. approved by the Principal or designee.

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3. **Text Messaging** Electronic Communications Between Teaching Staff Members and Students
 - a. Text messaging communications between a teaching staff member and an individual student are prohibited except as follows:
 - (1) However, a teaching staff may use technology applications (apps) that result in group text messages being authored and sent by the teaching staff member using a personal cellular telephone. Such applications or "apps" (i.e. the Remind Me app) are appropriate to use with students for the purpose of sending reminders and notifications that are within the scope of the teaching staff member's job responsibilities. Communications "apps" are limited to those that do not reveal the children's nor the teacher's cell phone numbers. When utilizing a cellular telephone application with students, the staff member must communicate the application's use to the students' parents/guardians and invite the parents/guardians to enlist as message recipients.
4. **Social Networking Websites** and other Internet-Based Social Media Electronic Communications Between Teaching Staff Members and a Student
 - a. A teaching staff member is prohibited from communicating with any student through the teaching staff member's personal social networking website or other Internet-based website. Communications on personal websites are not acceptable between a teaching staff member and a student.
 - b. A teaching staff member shall not accept "friend" requests from any student on their personal social networking website or other Internet-based social media website. Any communication sent by a student to a teaching staff member's personal social networking website or other Internet-based social media website shall not be responded to by the teaching staff member and shall be reported to the Principal or designee by the teaching staff member.
 - c. If a teaching staff member has a student(s) as a "friend" on their personal social networking website or other Internet-based social media website they must permanently remove them from their list of contacts upon Board adoption of this Policy.
 - d. Communication between a teaching staff member and a student through social networking websites or other Internet-based social media websites is only permitted provided the website has been approved by the Principal or designee and all communications or publications using such websites are available to: every student in the class and their

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d. (continued) parents/guardians; every member of the co-curricular activity and their parents/guardians; and the Principal or designee.

Reporting Responsibilities

In the event a student sends an improper electronic communication, as defined in this Policy, to a teaching staff member, the teaching staff member shall report the improper communication to the Principal or designee by the next school day. The Principal or designee will take appropriate action to have the student discontinue such improper electronic communications. Improper electronic communications by a teaching staff member or a student may result in appropriate disciplinary action.

Possible Exemptions:

1. Teaching Staff Members and Students who are Related

A teaching staff member and student may be exempt from the provisions outlined in this Policy if teaching staff member and the student are relatives. To attain such an exemption, the teaching staff member and the student's parent shall submit notification to the Principal of the teaching staff member's school and to the Principal of the student's school (as applicable) using the form provided by the District. Exemptions for a teaching member with regard to their own child are automatic and need not be requested.

2. Exemption for After School Care

A teaching staff member who provides after school care to students of the school district may be exempt from the provisions outlined in this policy. The teaching staff member and the student's parent for whom such services are provided shall submit written notification of their after school care arrangement to the Principal of the teaching staff member's school and to the Principal of the student's school (as applicable) using the form provided by the District. The Principal will either approve or deny the request and inform the teacher accordingly. This exemption shall only pertain to communications concerning the after school care of the student. Requests for this exemption, along with parental consent, shall be made by the teaching staff member and submitted to the Principal at the beginning of each school year or as soon as the after school care arrangement is known.

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3. Exemption - Friends of Own Child

An exemption may be permitted for a teaching staff member who may need to directly communicate with a student who is socializing with the teaching staff member's child outside of the school setting for reasons of safety and wellness. The teaching staff member and the student's parent shall submit a written request for this exemption to his or her Principal and to the Principal of the student's school (as applicable) using the form provided by the District. This exemption is limited solely for the purpose set forth in this provision. Requests for this exemption, along with parental consent, shall be made by the teaching staff member and submitted to the Principal at the beginning of each school year or as soon as the need for the exemption is known.

The provisions of this Policy shall be applicable at all times while the teaching staff member is employed in the school district and at all times the student is enrolled in the school district, including holiday and summer breaks.

A copy of this Policy will be made available on an annual basis, to all parents, students, and school employees either electronically or in school handbooks.

N.J.S.A. 18A:36-40

Adopted: October 7, 2014
Revised: February 3, 2015