Email, Text Messaging, and Social Networking Guidelines

The purpose of these guidelines is to ensure the proper use of Etowah County Schools’ email and Internet communication systems and to make users aware of what Etowah County Schools deems as acceptable and unacceptable use of its email and Internet communication systems. We reserve the right to amend these guidelines as necessary. In case of revisions, users will be informed by email, through professional development, at faculty meetings, grade level meetings, or department meeting, assemblies, in class, and/or by other means deemed appropriate by the administration.

Email

Legal Risks

Email is a school business or educational communication tool, and users are obliged to use this tool in a responsible, effective, and lawful manner. Although by its nature email seems to be less formal than other written communication, the same laws apply. Any email is discoverable in a due process situation or other legal action. In addition, any email exchanged by a school system employee is public record. Other legal risks of email for Etowah County Schools and/or their network users include the following:

- sending emails with any libelous, defamatory, offensive, racist or obscene remarks;
- forwarding emails with any libelous, defamatory, offensive, racist or obscene remarks;
- forwarding confidential information;
- forwarding or copying messages without permission or implied permission; and/or
- knowingly sending an attachment that contains a virus that severely affects another network.

By following the guidelines in this document, the email user can minimize the legal risks involved in the use of email. If any user disregards the rules set out in these guidelines, the user will be fully liable and Etowah County Schools will disassociate itself from the user as far as legally possible.

- Do not send or forward emails containing libelous, defamatory, offensive, racist or obscene remarks. If you receive an email containing libelous, defamatory, offensive, racist or obscene remarks, promptly notify your supervisor.
- Use caution if you forward a message without implied permission or without acquiring permission from the sender first, especially if it contains sensitive or personal information.
- Do not forge or attempt to forge email messages.
- Do not send email messages using another person’s or a bogus email account.
- Do not copy a message or attachment belonging to another user without the permission or implied permission of the originator.
- Do not disguise or attempt to disguise your identity when sending email.
Best Practices

Etowah County Schools considers email as an important means of communication and recognizes the importance of proper email content and of speedy replies in conveying a professional image and in delivering good customer service. The use of email in education, however, is proliferating and the precise legal issues regarding appropriate use are yet to be determined. We are confident that—

• Any email exchanged by school system employees about individual students is public record.
• Any email pertaining to a particular student is discoverable in a due process situation or other legal action.
• The nature of email lends itself to impulsive, overly informal, and sometimes unprofessional communication.

Therefore Etowah County Schools urges users to adhere to the following guidelines:

Guidance On Email Between School Employees And Parents/Guardians

Examples of generally appropriate use of email between school employees and parents/guardians:

• Teachers invite parents to provide email addresses and then send out emails to those addresses reporting on classroom activities, projects, and assignments. These messages are generic and do not refer to specific students.
• Teachers may initiate or respond to email from a parent or guardian about a specific child, exchanging objective not subjective information such as the student’s attendance, participation, homework, and performance in class.

Examples of inappropriate use of email between school employees and parents/guardians:

• Using email to report on serious problems regarding individual students.
• Using email to discuss confidential and sensitive matters, including:
  o Medical/psychiatric/psychological diagnoses and treatments.
  o Contents of special education and/or Section 504 evaluations, intervention plans, IEPs, 504 plans, disciplinary matters.
  o Family problems and other sensitive family information.
• Using, in email, language that is subjective, judgmental, unprofessional, pejorative, and/or labeling.

Examples:
  o “Have you considered that Johnny might have ADHD?”
  o “Overall, I think that Johnny is unmotivated/lazy.”
  o “I don’t think there is anything wrong with Johnny except his negative attitude.”
Email between teachers and parents should be positive and/or general in nature when possible. Discussions involving serious problems and any and all protected information (medical, psychological, psychiatric, Special Education, and Section 504, and disciplinary matters) should occur in person or by telephone.

Parents may initiate inappropriate email exchanges. Example:

“Johnny is in your American History class and is failing. His father is an alcoholic and we are divorced. Johnny has ADHD and clinical depression. Can you please tell me how he is doing in your class and what I can do to help him?”

That kind of message should be deleted and the teacher receiving it should call the parent who sent it. Alternately, the teacher could reply to it, deleting everything from the body of the email sent by the parent, and then respond with directions about how the teacher can be reached by telephone or in person.

**Guidance On Email Between School Employees Concerning Students**

Examples of generally appropriate use of email between school employees:

- Emails which provide positive information, objective comments, and/or neutral information regarding school performance. In other words, conducting straight-forward business, staying away from sensitive and confidential areas.

Examples of inappropriate use of email between school employees:

- Using email to report on serious problems regarding individual students.
- Using email to discuss confidential and sensitive matters, including
  - Medical/psychiatric/psychological diagnoses and treatments.
  - Contents of special education and/or Section 504 evaluations, intervention plans, IEPs, 504 plans, disciplinary matters.
  - Family problems and other sensitive family information.
- Using, in email, language that is subjective, judgmental, unprofessional, pejorative, and/or labeling.

Examples:

- “I think Johnny has ADHD”
- “Overall, I think that Johnny is unmotivated/lazy”
- “I don’t think there is anything wrong with Johnny except his negative attitude.”
- “I think this child’s problem is his home life.”

Discussions involving severe problems, subjective comments, and any and all protected information (medical, psychological, psychiatric, Special Education, and Section 504, and disciplinary matters) should occur in person or by telephone.
General **Best Practices** involving all email are as follows:

### Writing emails:
- Use short, descriptive **Subject: lines**.
- Avoid lengthy, detailed email messages. Consider using an attachment for “How To” information, directions, procedures, processes, or similar types of information.
- Avoid unnecessary attachments or large file attachments such as multiple pictures, mini movies, etc. AVOID USING ALL CAPITALS.
- If using cc or bcc feature, take steps to inform the cc or bcc recipient of any action expected unless the action is explicit in the email. The bcc option is often used to avoid revealing recipient email addresses to the entire group receiving the email; otherwise, the bcc option should be used sparingly if at all.
- If you forward emails, state clearly what action you expect the recipient to take.
- Use the spell checker before you send out an email.
- If the content of an email is not of a public nature,
  - consider using another form of communication or
  - protect the information by using a password.
- Only mark emails as important if they really are important.

### Replying to emails:
- Emails should be answered within 24 hours, and **at minimum** employees are expected to check email at least once per day.
- Responses should not reveal confidential information and should be professional.

### Newsgroups/ListServs:
Users should exercise caution before subscribing to a listserv, newsletter or news group. This type of email may be overwhelming and cancelling a newsgroup and/or newsletter subscription is often difficult if not unsuccessful.

### Maintenance
- Delete email messages in a timely manner.
- Print email messages required for documentation.
- Messages in the Deleted Items/Trash folder will be automatically removed in 30 days.
- A more frequent manual deletion of items by the individual user is recommended.
- Messages in the Sent Items folder will be removed in 90 days. A more frequent manual deletion of items by the individual user is recommended.
- Avoid responding to request in emails that could be “phishing” attempts.
- Avoid opening attachments that are suspicious or mass forwarding virus hoaxes.
- Check with the technology staff when in doubt of the suspicious nature of emails.
Electronic Social Networking, Instant Messaging including Texting, etc.

Electronic social networking and/or instant messaging, such as but not limited to Twitter, IM, or texting, among staff and students is a particularly sensitive matter in a time when growing numbers of school employees maintain social networking accounts, email extensively in their personal lives, and are accustomed to using instant messaging services.

An absolute prohibition of communicating electronically with students seems excessive. On the other hand, teachers and school staff must maintain the highest standards should they choose to interact with students through electronic media. Below are some typical situations on which employees might need guidance.

Guidelines below are presented in a Q&A format.

Q: Is it ok for me to initiate electronic communications with a student?

A: If a teacher initiates overly personal contact with students outside of school, whether in person or electronically, he or she may create an impression of an unhealthy interest in that student's personal life and may leave himself or herself open to an accusation of inappropriate conduct. Therefore, caution should be exercised in this type of communication.

Q: What if I receive an email or other electronic message such as a text from a student?

A: This very much depends on the nature of the communication received. We would strongly discourage any use of texting, instant messaging or “chat”-type communication with students for purposes other than school related communications. If a communication is received which appears to be a social greeting, you might do best just to acknowledge it in an appropriate way at school. A very brief acknowledging electronic response might be appropriate in some circumstances. However, it is perfectly OK not to respond to such greetings. If you choose to not respond, making an extra effort to cheerfully greet the student at school might be appropriate. If a student sends a message with disturbing content, you should discuss this with your administrator or supervisor, including a school counselor in the discussion as needed. If a student sends a message that appears to suggest an emergency (an allegation of abuse or a student sharing suicidal thoughts or plans), try to contact your administrator or supervisor at once.

Q: What about Facebook accounts or other social networking sites? Should I respond to an invitation to become a student’s “Friend”?

A: We recommend that you not engage in online social networking with students unless the site is used for school information or academic reasons only. This would only be an issue, of course, if you choose to maintain a Facebook, or similar account. If you do so, we recommend that you be extremely cautious about the content of your profiles and pages. If you are strictly using a social networking site for school related topics and stay away from personal content then these sites should be treated much like any other educational blog. However, the use of comments, “writing on walls,” and so on, would be likely to lead to major problems if an approval process is not in place before posting. You may find that it is easier to simply tell your students that you have a policy not to accept students as “friends.”
General Email Information

Virus Protection and Filtering

Incoming and outgoing emails sent to or received from Etowah County Schools’ Gmail/Google server are scanned for viruses, spam, and content. However, users are expected to exercise caution when opening emails from unknown users or when using the web-based email client from home computers.

Incoming emails may be blocked if the message size is over 100,000 KB or if there are multiple attachments.

Disclaimer

Etowah County Schools recommends that employees add a disclaimer to outgoing emails or automatically attach a disclaimer such as the one below to each email sent outside the school system.

“This email and any files transmitted with it are confidential and intended solely for the use of the individual or entity to which they are addressed. If you have received this email in error please notify the system manager. Please note that any views or opinions presented in this email are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Etowah County Schools. Finally, the recipient should check this email and any attachments for the presence of viruses. The company accepts no liability for any damage caused by any virus transmitted by this email.”

System Monitoring

Users must have no expectation of privacy in anything they create, store, send or receive on the Etowah County Schools’ computer system. Emails can be monitored without prior notification if Etowah County Schools deems this necessary. If there is evidence that users are not adhering to the guidelines set out in this policy, Etowah County Schools reserves the right to take disciplinary action, including termination and/or legal action.

Email Accounts

Email accounts are assigned to new employees when their employment is approved by the Board of Education and when the new employee has completed the required paperwork for Human Resources/Personnel. All @ecboe.org email accounts and internet communication systems through this domain are property of Etowah County Schools. Passwords should not be given to other people and should be changed if the user believes his/her password is no longer secure. Email accounts are deleted immediately when employees retire, resign, or leave the school system for a period of six months or more. Only Etowah County employees are given email accounts.
Electronic Communications for Personal Use

Although Etowah County Schools’ email and Internet communication systems is meant for school business, Etowah County Schools allows the reasonable use of email for personal use if certain guidelines are adhered to:

• Personal use of email should not interfere with work.
• Personal emails must also adhere to the guidelines in this policy.
• Personal emails should be deleted regularly so as not to clog up the system.

The forwarding of chain letters, junk mail, inappropriate jokes and executables is strictly forbidden.
Do not send personal mass mailings.
Do not send emails for personal gain, to solicit business for friends, family, etc., or for political purposes.
All messages distributed via the school system’s email and Internet communication systems, even personal emails, are Etowah County Schools’ property.

Questions

If you have any questions or comments about these guidelines, please contact your principal or immediate supervisor. If you do not have any questions Etowah County Schools presume that you understand and are aware of the rules and guidelines and will adhere to them.