

Policy

FREEDOM OF SPEECH IN NONINSTRUCTIONAL SETTINGS

The Mount Laurel Township School District Board of Education acknowledges the right of its employees, as citizens in a democratic society, to speak out on issues of public concern. This includes the right of employees to use all methods of communication available through traditional media and the internet. When making public expressions regarding school related issues the employee's expression must be balanced against the impact to the interests of this district.

When participating in virtual communities it is important for staff members to be mindful that the virtual community is a public forum and that online conversation may impact the district. The Internet is neither anonymous nor forgetful and there is no clear line between an individual's work life and personal life on a social media site. What is posted on social network sites and blogs is part of a permanent public record, accessible to board members, staff, students, parents/guardians, colleagues, friends and members of the media. Ultimately, the individual making the post has sole responsibility for what is posted to a blog or published in any form of online social media.

To avoid situations in which the employee's expression could conflict with the district's interests the following rules shall be used to guide employee public expressions:

- A. Only the chief school administrator or staff members authorized by the chief school administrator may speak for the district, whether online or offline;
- B. When speaking of school matters in a public forum including social media sites, employees should state clearly that their expression represents personal views and not those of the school district;
- C. In order to avoid disrupting student and staff relationships, staff members should not direct expressions toward any individual(s) with whom they would normally be in daily contact in the performance of regular duties, nor should employees:
 1. Make abusive or personally defamatory comments about students, parents/guardians, coworkers, administrators or officials of the district;
 2. Discuss information about students, parents/guardians or other district employee that would violate their right to confidentiality; and
 3. Make threats against students, parents/guardians, co-workers, supervisors or district officials;
- D. Employees should refrain from making public expressions which:
 1. Are known to be false or made without regard for truth or accuracy;
 2. Would cause interference with the regular operations of the school;
 3. Would impede the employee in the proper performance of assigned duties; and
 4. Would disrupt harmony among students and co-workers or interfere with the maintenance of discipline by school officials.

Staff members found to be in violation of this policy and any other district policy regarding conduct and behavior, use of technology, and/or use of social networks may be subject to disciplinary measures.

General Guidelines for Social Media Usage

The district recommends the following for all staff members when using personal social media sites:

- A. Respect your audience and your role as a school employee. As a school district that values diversity the use ethnic slurs, personal insults, obscenity, or engaging any conduct that is violation with law or board policy is discouraged;
- B. Be smart about protecting yourself and your privacy. What is published on the internet will be around for a long time, so consider the content carefully and exercise caution when disclosing personal details about yourself and others;
- C. Be thoughtful about how you present yourself in online social networks. The lines between personal and professional lives are blurred in online social networks;
- D. The district respects the right to free speech. Staff may express themselves and their opinions within the confines of law as long as they are clearly representing themselves as individuals and not representing the views of the district;
- E. If you are writing anything related to work with the district or board on a blog or another online space, make it clear that you represent your views and opinions and you are not presenting yourself as a spokesperson for the district or board;
- F. Be accurate and factual. Make sure that what you are saying is factually correct, and do not make inflammatory statements or attempt to engage in an aggressive or defensive way. While you may certainly use your blog—or join someone else's--to point out discrepancies, do so respectfully and factually;
- G. Use your best judgment. Remember that there can be consequences to public expressions and what you publish in any format. Assume that what you post on social networking sites or blogs will be part of a permanent public record, accessible to members, colleagues, friends and members of the media. If you're about to publish something that makes you even the slightest bit uncomfortable, review the suggestions above and think twice about posting it. Ultimately, however, you have sole responsibility for what you post to your blog or publish in any form of online social media.

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 Revised: May 24, 2005
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Key Words

Freedom, Rights, Freedom of Speech

Possible

<u>Cross References:</u> *2224	Nondiscrimination/affirmative action
*4111.1/4211.1	Nondiscrimination/affirmative action
4118.1	Rights, responsibilities and duties
4118.4	Academic freedom
4119.22/4219.22	Conduct and dress

*Indicates policy is included in the Critical Policy Reference Manual.