



Social Media: An Overview for Publicly Elected Trustees

Background

Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have become powerful tools for trustees in engaging with school board staff, fellow trustees, parents, media and the community. Along with the opportunities that social media provides, publicly elected school board trustees must be aware of the risks associated with participation and engagement on social media.

School board trustees are the members of a school board. They are locally-elected representatives of the public, and they are the community's advocate for public education. **They are required to carry out their responsibilities in a manner that assists the board in fulfilling its duties under the Education Act.** A trustee's role is to maintain a focus on student achievement, well-being and equity and to participate in making decisions that benefit the board's entire jurisdiction, while ensuring that the views of their community are put forward. Trustees also communicate the views and decisions of the board back to their community. Trustees are expected to adhere to the Board Code of Conduct, and as leaders of the school board, they must uphold the dignity of the office and conduct themselves in a professional manner.

Why Use Social Media

Would you like to share photos*, videos, school news and links to relevant information with your community? Social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and Pinterest can offer the perfect way to do just that and more. Social media can:

- Provide a way to engage and share board and school news with parents and the communities you serve, using the same tools they are already using.
- Build trust and two-way dialogues with key followers and influencers (even those you have not met in person, yet).
- Provide great opportunities for unfiltered listening and discussion on any topic imaginable.
- Provide direct access to potential positive media coverage – access to reporters and newsrooms. Journalists use social media as a source of news and feature stories and up-to-the minute updates of events (live-tweeting), to report breaking news and track developing news.
- Help keep you up-to-date on the education trends in your area's schools, your board, and other school boards.
- Help you position yourself as a thought leader in your community.
- Strengthen democracy – community members can easily engage with, and receive information from trustees.

**Be mindful of school board policies on student privacy and consent for release of photos.*

Risks

Risks can be mitigated with some proper planning and discipline. Some good advice for users includes:

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- Beware of 'trolls' – There are social media users who are merely seeking to agitate others. Learn to recognize a troll when you see one, and don't respond. "Walk" away.
- Remember, journalists are watching – It might sometimes seem like you're sending a message into the void, but reporters and bloggers are always watching for stories, both online and offline. Saying something inflammatory on Facebook, Twitter and other platforms is no different than posting it on your website or sending it out in a newsletter. Don't post anything you wouldn't say out loud in a crowded room.
- Be informative, but do not impose your views on others. Welcome a range of viewpoints, and try to seek common ground. Social media must be democratic to be constructive.
- Be aware of communications barriers, such as language proficiency, culture and the accessibility needs of your online communities.
- Don't be afraid to lose control of the message at times. Think about it like this – your community may already be talking about you. Why wouldn't you want to know what they are saying so you can plan your communications strategy accordingly?
- Take action against harassment by a fellow social media user – Most applications have an option to block and report complaints about other accounts. On Twitter, for example, you can block and report users from seeing your tweets by clicking on their username and visiting their profile. Users can also be reported for disseminating spam and being abusive. Cyberbullying happens to people of all ages and backgrounds – if a user is taking their communications with you one step too far and you feel bullied or abused, consider contacting your local police service.
- As an elected school board trustee, OPSBA recommends you use your real name as part of your handle on social media accounts, if possible.
- The lines between public and private and personal and professional are blurred in the digital world. When you represent yourself as a school board trustee, you are now connected to colleagues, stakeholders and the public education community. However, unless you are the Chair or designate on a particular issue, you must remember you are not the board spokesperson.

Create a Social Media Strategy for Yourself

School board trustees will get the most out of their social media efforts by creating a personalized social media strategy. Trustees who use social media with personality, purpose and a strategic plan will have a greater communications impact, advancing their work and building support for issues affecting students, school boards and communities in the process.

You'll want to define your objectives, figure out which audiences you want to target, decide what to share and whether to promote your presence and evaluate your efforts.

For more information on creating a social media strategy and suggested guidelines for appropriate and effective use of social media, visit <http://modules.ontarioschooltrustees.org/> and click on Module 18: Social Media.

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