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SOCIAL NETWORKING IN SCHOOLS: BENEFITS AND RISKS; REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH; POLICY CONSIDERATIONS; AND CURRENT PRACTICES

At a Glance

The role that social media should play in education is being hotly debated in school districts across the country. The adoption of social networking for educational purposes lags behind the public's general usage because educators fear that students will be exposed to inappropriate online content, unwanted adult interactions, and bullying from peers. Advocates of social networking in the classroom, on the other hand, contend that when schools restrict students' access to these sites, they deprive them of the opportunity to use new communication tools to research, create, and learn. This Information Capsule reviews the benefits and risks associated with education-based social networking, summarizes the research conducted to determine the impact of social media on student learning, and provides recommendations for school districts to follow when they are establishing social networking policies. Examples of the ways in which social networking activities are currently being used in schools are also provided. Finally, this report includes a summary of Miami-Dade County Public Schools' Network and Internet Responsible Use Policies, along with information on the District's proposed Bring Your Own Device initiative, Internet Content Filter, and Bullying and Harassment Policy.

Although most school districts around the country still prohibit social networking in the classroom, some educators and policymakers are reconsidering the ban on social media. Social networking sites may expose students to potential risks, most notably cyberbullying, but early studies suggest that their use in the classroom can promote academic learning and increase student engagement. Before allowing social networking in the classroom, it is imperative that school districts formulate strong policies that address harmful online interactions and provide educators and students with guidance and oversight in the use of social media. Many non-commercial education-based social networking sites are emerging in response to mounting concerns over student safety and the security risks associated with commercial social networking sites. These non-commercial sites provide a compromise solution for school districts attempting to strike a balance between unrestricted access to social media and its total exclusion from classrooms.

Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter enable people to form virtual communities and collaborate with one another. These sites include a range of communication platforms, such as profiles, blogs, podcasts, discussion boards, instant messaging, and sharing of text, photographs, and videos (Washington Education Association, 2012; Bumgardner & Knestis, 2011; Madrid Waddington Central School District, 2011).

Facebook is currently the most popular social networking site, with an estimated 750 million visitors each month. Twitter, a micro-blogging social networking site, has an estimated 250 million visitors each month. MySpace was once the world's fastest growing social network, but did not keep pace with Facebook. The site currently has an estimated 70.5 million viewers per month. YouTube is the most popular video sharing site - its videos are viewed four billion times every day (eBizMBA, 2012; Waugh, 2012; New York Times, 2011).

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Bumgardner and Knestis (2011) reported that many school districts in the U.S. are struggling with questions about the use of social networking as an educational tool, including: How can we protect students? What are the educational benefits? What policy issues need to be considered? Because there are no quick or easy answers to these questions, the researchers noted that the adoption of social networking for educational purposes has lagged behind the public's general usage.

Many school districts across the country have limited the in-school use of social networking technology. The restrictions are based on fears that students will be exposed to inappropriate online content, unwanted adult interactions, and bullying from peers. Many are not convinced of social media's educational benefits and fear that these sites serve as portals for antisocial and unproductive student behavior. On the other hand, advocates of social networking in the classroom contend that when schools restrict students' access to these sites, they deprive them of the opportunity to use new communication tools to research, create, and learn. They maintain that all new technologies suffer public relations problems. For example, in the early 1990s, the Internet was the topic of a similar debate, but it is hard to imagine a school not connected to the Internet today (Archer & Eger, 2012; Fouts, 2012; Goldfarb et al., 2011; Huffington Post, 2011; Su, 2011; Brady, 2010; Kessler, 2010a; Klopfer et al., 2009; Smith, 2007).

Despite the efforts of many school districts to restrict the use of social networking, the U.S. Department of Education's *National Education Technology Plan 2010* encouraged all states and districts to experiment with social networks and other web 2.0 technologies to expand collaborative learning opportunities for students and create communities of practice among educators. Furthermore, the Federal Communications Commission stated that social networking sites have the potential to support student learning and that while individual pages on sites such as Facebook or MySpace might be potentially harmful to minors, these sites are not in and of themselves harmful to minors (Donlin, 2011).

STUDENT USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

A recent survey sponsored by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project found that 95 percent of teens ages 12 to 17 are online and 80 percent of these online teens use social networking sites (Lenhart et al., 2011). The National School Boards Association (2007) survey of 9-17 year olds found that the most popular social networking activities reported were posting messages (41 percent); downloading music (32 percent); downloading videos (30 percent); uploading music (29 percent); updating personal websites or online profiles (25 percent); and posting photos (24 percent).

A survey conducted for Microsoft Corporation (2010) found that children typically get their first social network account by the age of 13. Surveys conducted by researchers at Children Online found that the number of younger children using Facebook has risen dramatically in the past two years (Fodeman & Monroe, 2011). As shown in Table 1, the majority of eighth grade students (85 percent) report spending time on Facebook. In addition, the percent of students using Facebook increased from 2008-09 to 2010-11 at each of the grade levels surveyed.

Table 1. Percent of Grades 4-8 Students Using Facebook, 2008-09 and 2010-11

| Grade | 2008-09 % on Facebook | 2010-11 % on Facebook |
|-------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 4 | 2% | 7% |
| 5 | 2% | 9% |
| 6 | 10% | 25% |
| 7 | 25% | 47% |
| 8 | 61% | 85% |

Source: Fodeman & Monroe, 2011.

BENEFITS OF EDUCATION-BASED SOCIAL NETWORKING

Proponents of education-based social networking argue that its educational benefits far outweigh the risks. They are concerned that schools are missing out on an opportunity to incorporate powerful and effective learning tools into classroom instruction (Goldfarb et al., 2011; Pollara & Zhu, 2011; Stout, 2011a; Kessler, 2010a). Benefits of social networking are summarized below.

- **Incorporates students' preferred learning styles into instruction.** Many schools ban the technology that students use for their informal communications and learning. Students use social media at home, on the go, and even sometimes in school hallways, but typically not in the classroom. The current generation of learners has grown up with the web and expects to utilize technology in their learning. They want content and course materials that are interactive, customizable, flexible, and available on-demand. Animations, demonstrations, and video instruction appeal to the active learning style of today's students. One principal stated: "Kids are coming to us bored, disconnected, and it's a challenge for us to figure out how to leverage the tools inherent in the real-time web" (Fouts, 2012; Toppo, 2011; Magid, 2010; Baird & Fisher, 2005).
- **Provides students with immediate feedback.** Social networking allows teachers to provide students with immediate instructional guidance in and outside of the classroom. Researchers report that the ability to ask for help and receive advice instantly gives students a sense of control over their own learning (Goldfarb et al., 2011).
- **Allows teachers to quickly recognize students' learning needs.** Because social networking sites encourage continual submissions, teachers have an abundance of materials on which to assess student learning. Students who are having difficulty with certain concepts can be identified more quickly than through occasional tests or assignments, allowing for earlier interventions (Goldfarb et al., 2011).
- **Enhances communication.** Use of social networking in the classroom transforms passive one-way teaching into two-way collaboration. Teachers can post homework assignments and share news and resources with the student community. The social network becomes a destination for students in a classroom to come together to share their viewpoints and discuss ideas (Fouts, 2012; Lee, 2012; Washington Education Association, 2012; Stout, 2011b).
- **Creates a collaborative atmosphere.** Social media as a teaching tool has a natural collaborative element. It allows teachers to boost student interaction and form a community that shares ideas, approaches, and resources. Students critique and comment on each other's assignments, work in teams to create content, and can easily access each other to ask questions or start a discussion. As a result, students learn by interacting with their peers (Fouts, 2012; Bumgardner & Knestis, 2011; Goldfarb et al., 2011; Holcomb et al., 2010; Kessler, 2010a; Roper, 2010).
- **Increases student engagement.** Because students are familiar with and enjoy the informality of the online environment, they are automatically more receptive to material presented on social networking sites. The use of social networking tools provides teachers with an opportunity to reach students who are hesitant to join in traditional classroom discussions (Fouts, 2012; Goldfarb et al., 2011; Walsh, 2011a).

A study of students attending Lock Haven University in Pennsylvania found that the use of Twitter increased students' classroom engagement. The treatment group was given assignments and discussions that incorporated Twitter, while the control group received the same assignments but did not use Twitter. Students who used Twitter showed more than twice the increase in engagement than the control group on the National Survey of Student Engagement (Kessler, 2010b).

- **Provides educators with a tool for teaching students responsible networking skills.** An increasing number of school districts believe that students need to learn how to use the Internet responsibly and that they should be held accountable for their behavior. Use of social networking in the classroom provides teachers with the opportunity to discuss social networking safety with students, including appropriate boundaries to online social interaction, keeping passwords private, never talking to strangers online, and treating others respectfully (Bosco, 2011; Sullivan, 2010; National School Boards Association, 2007). According to *USA Today*, the American Library Association encourages schools to reconsider bans on social media. Their policy statement says that prohibition “does not teach safe behavior and leaves youth without the necessary knowledge and skills to protect their privacy or engage in responsible speech” (Toppo, 2011).
- **Prepares students for the future.** Social networking helps students obtain skills they will need for postsecondary education and the workforce. Social networking technologies are widely used in colleges and universities. In the business world, social media has become more important each year and an increasing number of professional positions require employees to be proficient in its use (Brindley, 2012; Walsh, 2011a; Young Adult Library Services Association, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2010).
- **Creates professional learning communities for teachers.** Teachers, who often feel isolated in their classrooms, are able to share ideas and learn from educators from around the world and find the best ways to integrate new technologies into classroom teaching. Teachers now have 24/7 access to data, analytic tools, expertise, and resources (Lee, 2012; Davis, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). In addition, social networking sites provide teachers with more customized and collaborative professional development opportunities (Washington Education Association, 2012; Davis, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH EDUCATION-BASED SOCIAL NETWORKING

Many educators are hesitant to integrate social networking into classroom instruction. Much of this reluctance stems from the risks inherent in student Internet usage. A report from the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on the Judiciary (2009) stated that cyberbullying is the chief danger facing children and teens online. Other risks include exposure to offensive material, compromised online safety, and publication of private information (Goldfarb et al., 2011; Guynn, 2010; Sullivan, 2010; Klopfer et al., 2009). Risks associated with education-based social networking include:

- **Cyberbullying.** The term cyberbullying has many different definitions and can cover many different types of speech. It can consist of rumors or lies, a publication of something meant to be private, or the impersonation of another person. It can also include more problematic speech, such as threats, stalking, or predatory behavior. Social networking sites make bullying easier and more public than bullying through other online activities such as email and instant messaging (Fouts, 2012; Stout, 2011a; U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on the Judiciary, 2009; Griffith & Liyanage, 2008). Most cyberbullying victims know their offender. Research conducted by Hinduja and Patchin (2009) found that 21.1 percent of victims report that the cyberbully is a friend, 20.0 percent say it is an ex-friend; and 26.5 percent say it is someone else from school. Only 6.5 percent report that the cyberbully is a stranger.

Estimates of the number of youth who experience cyberbullying vary. The Cyberbullying Research Center (2012) reported that the percent of students who say they have been victimized by cyberbullies ranges from 12 to 21 percent, based on the results of seven studies conducted between 2004 and 2010. A survey sponsored by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project found that 15 percent of social media-using teens, ages 12 to 17, reported that they had been the target of online meanness or harassment (Lenhart et al., 2011). Most victims of cyberbullying don't tell an

adult about their experience. Hinduja and Patchin (2009) reported that only about 40 percent of middle school cyberbullying victims tell their parents and less than 30 percent tell a teacher.

The Pew Research Center survey of teens ages 12 to 17 found that among teens who had experienced cruelty or mean behavior on social network sites, there were no statistically significant differences by age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. In other words, teens who experienced online harassment were equally likely to be older teens and younger teens; girls and boys; and youth from both lower- and higher-income families (Lenhart et al., 2011). [It should be noted that several studies have reported that the incidence of cyberbullying is higher among girls than boys; and is most prevalent among 15 to 16 year olds (Aoyama et al., 2011; Mullens, 2011; National Crime Prevention Council, 2007)]. Studies suggest that students who experience cyberbullying (both those who are victims and the cyberbullies themselves) perceive a poorer school climate than those who do not experience cyberbullying. It is not yet clear whether cyberbullying behaviors create a poor school climate or if a poor school climate fosters a culture where cyberbullying behaviors are acceptable (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Some studies have also investigated the cyberbullies themselves and witnesses to cyberbullying. According to the Cyberbullying Research Center (2012), a survey of 4,441 10-18 year olds attending 37 schools within a large school district found that 19 percent of respondents admitted that they had cyberbullied others within their lifetime; 9 percent said they had cyberbullied others within the previous 30 days. In the Pew Research Center survey, 88 percent of teens said they had seen someone be mean or cruel to another person on a social networking site; 21 percent of teens said they joined in when they witnessed online cruelty (Lenhart et al., 2011).

- **Exposure to offensive material.** One of the biggest objections to classroom use of social networking is the likelihood that students will encounter offensive material (Toppo, 2011; Guynn, 2010). The National School Boards Association's (2007) online survey of 1,277 students, ages 9 to 17, found that 20 percent of respondents said they had seen inappropriate pictures on social networking sites within the last three months and 18 percent had seen inappropriate language on these sites.
- **Compromised online safety.** Social network users are susceptible to phishing, or attempts to acquire personal information such as passwords and banking information, through fraudulent means. This information is then used to steal the user's identity. Scam artists and even some companies set up applications or advertisements to trick young users. Children and teenagers often make costly decisions to download "free software" or respond to an advertisement and put their private information at risk (Fodeman & Monroe, 2011; Davis, 2010; Holcomb et al., 2010; Griffith & Liyanage, 2008).

The Pew Research Center's survey of teens ages 12 to 17 found that a notable number of respondents said they engaged in online practices that had the potential to compromise their online safety. For example, 44 percent of respondents admitted to lying about their age so they could access a website or sign up for an online account; 30 percent reported sharing one of their passwords with a friend, boyfriend, or girlfriend (Lenhart et al., 2011).

- **Publication of private information.** Children and teenagers growing up with social networking may not realize that the information they post is public and that photographs and text can be retrieved even after they are deleted. Consequences of over-sharing personal information include vulnerability to sexual or financial predators and lost job opportunities. A growing number of employers check the Facebook profiles and other social networking activities of job candidates. A Microsoft survey found that 70 percent of employers found evidence of poor judgment, immaturity, and other undesirable behaviors on candidates' social networking sites that caused them to reject those candidates for positions within their organizations (Social Networking Pro Con, 2012; Starkman, 2010).

Studies suggest, however, that teens may be becoming more cautious about the content they post online. The Pew Research Center survey of 12 to 17 year olds found that 55 percent of the respondents said they had decided not to post content that might reflect poorly on them in the future. Interestingly, social network users were almost twice as likely as non-social network users (60 percent versus 34 percent) to say they had withheld content after considering the potential ramifications. Older teens (ages 14 to 17) were more likely than younger teens (ages 12 to 13) to say they had reconsidered posting content online after thinking about the negative implications (59 percent versus 46 percent). The oldest group of online teens, who presumably were preparing for college and job applications, reported the highest levels of discretion: 67 percent of 17 year olds said they had withheld content that might damage their reputation (Lenhart et al., 2011).

- **Reduced face-to-face communication.** Some educators are concerned that social networking discourages face-to-face communication, causing overly active users to miss valuable lessons in real-life social skills. This could lead to a disadvantage for students at job interviews, social gatherings, or in personal relationships (Fouts, 2012; The Net Researcher, 2012; Fodeman & Monroe, 2011). A growing number of psychologists and neuroscientists believe that overuse of social networking sites can reduce children's ability to have real conversations, shorten their attention spans, encourage a need for instant gratification, and create self-centered personalities (Derbyshire, 2009). Larry D. Rosen, a psychology professor at California State University, reported that daily overuse of social networking makes children more prone to anxiety, depression, and other psychological disorders (Science Daily, 2011).
- **Distraction from school work.** Many educators believe that social networking tools are a distraction from serious study and have a negative impact on student learning. They maintain that sites like Facebook and Twitter divert students' attention away from classroom instruction and are ultimately disruptive to the learning process (Fouts, 2012; The Net Researcher, 2012; Science Daily, 2011). Walsh (2011a) noted that teachers must provide students with guidance and oversight to keep them focused on classroom instruction.

A survey of 250 school district leaders conducted by the National School Boards Association (2007) found that most respondents reported that they were skeptical about the educational value of social networking, with only 29 percent believing that it could help students improve their reading or writing and 36 percent believing it could help students learn to work together to solve academic problems. It should be noted that this report was published in 2007; therefore, more recent data are needed to determine if educators' views have changed in the last five years.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT EDUCATION-BASED SOCIAL NETWORKING

Social networking in the classroom is a relatively new phenomenon so very little research has been conducted to determine its impact on student learning. Several studies have concluded that social networking can be effectively integrated with academic learning because it promotes the development of students' collaborative and problem-solving skills. Two studies conducted with college-level students found no relationship between the use of social networking sites and academic performance, while one study reported that college students using social media spent less time studying and had lower grade point averages than those who did not use social networking sites. Clearly, more research is needed to determine how social networking sites complement the educational environment and how they affect more traditional approaches to education, especially at the K-12 level. Summaries of research conducted to date are provided below.

- Greenhow and Robelia (2009) surveyed over 800 high school seniors living in the upper Midwestern U.S. and conducted follow-up case studies, using content analysis to code and analyze students' social network profile pages. All students used MySpace as their primary social network. The researchers found that students reported engaging in an array of practices within MySpace that

increased their technological, creative, and communication skills. Students' literacy practices within MySpace - proofreading, continuous revision and updating, and consideration of word choice, tone, audience interests, and style - were found to align with writing practices traditionally valued in school.

- Greenhow and Burton (2011) found that students build important bonds when they connect with school friends on social networking sites. The researchers surveyed 607 low-income high school students and observed that in addition to deepening friendships, some students used the sites to get information and suggestions about college and career options. Greenhow stated: "When kids feel connected and have a strong sense of belonging to the school community, they do better in school."
- Tian and colleagues (2011) found that college students' online social networking directly influenced social learning and often had a positive impact on academic learning. The researchers surveyed almost 200 students and conducted follow-up focus groups. They found two main themes in students' reported Facebook use - one social and one educational. Social learning was enhanced by the ability to connect with family and friends, the establishment and maintenance of virtual relationships, and the ability to follow peer trends. In terms of learning, students reported that Facebook allowed them to share knowledge with their peers, join study groups established for content areas, and use educational applications for organizing learning activities. The researchers concluded that Facebook helped students become academically and socially integrated.
- Belnora (2009) surveyed 1,127 University of New Hampshire students and obtained corresponding course grade files. She found no correlation between the amount of time students spent using social media and their course grades. Belnora defined light usage of social media as less than 31 minutes per day and heavy usage as over 61 minutes per day. Social media was defined as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn, or blogs. High grades were defined as "A"s and "A"s and "B"s; low grades were defined as "B"s and lower. Findings showed that 63 percent of heavy users received high grades, compared to 65 percent of light users. A comparison of students receiving lower grades indicated that 37 percent of heavy users received lower grades, while 35 percent of light users received lower grades.
- Hargittai and Hsieh (2010) found no evidence that social networking was correlated with lower academic achievement. The researchers surveyed 1,060 first-year college students attending a university in the Midwest. The study collected self-reports of participants on the social networking sites Bebo, Facebook, Friendster, MySpace, Orkut, and Xanga. The researchers found that demographic factors such as gender, ethnic background, and parental education were more of a determining factor in grade point average than use of social networking sites.
- Karpinski and Duberstein (2009) surveyed 219 students at Ohio State University. Of the participants, 148 said that they had a Facebook account. In contrast to the studies summarized above, the researchers reported that students who used Facebook spent less time studying and had lower grade point averages (GPAs) than students who did not use Facebook. Facebook users said they averaged one to five hours per week studying, while non-users reported studying 11 to 15 hours per week. Facebook users had GPAs between 3.0 and 3.5, while non-users had GPAs between 3.5 and 4.0. Interestingly, 79 percent of Facebook users claimed that their use of the site did not interfere with their studies, leading the researchers to conclude that there was a "disconnect between students' claim that Facebook doesn't impact their studies, and our finding showing they had lower grades and spent less time studying." The researchers emphasized that their study did not prove that Facebook caused lower GPAs. For example, some students might have found other ways to avoid studying if they did not have access to Facebook and would have still received lower grades.
- A recent study conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA) (2011) received a lot of media attention but the results should be viewed with

extreme caution, as the study contained serious methodological flaws. CASA's online survey of over 1,000 teenagers, ages 12 to 17, compared the responses of teenagers who reported that they did not spend any time on a social networking site on a typical day to those who did so. The researchers stated that teenagers who said they spent time on a social networking site were five times more likely to report using tobacco (10 percent versus 2 percent); three times more likely to report using alcohol (26 percent versus 9 percent); and twice as likely to report using marijuana (13 percent versus 7 percent).

The most serious methodological flaw in CASA's study is that the survey included respondents with ages as diverse as 12 to 17, but did not disaggregate results by age. Males (2011) stated that in order to have any validity, the study should have compared the behaviors of youth of identical age (for example, 12 year olds who spent time on social media versus 12 year olds who did not spend time on social media). The finding that 12 year olds are less likely to use alcohol, tobacco, and drugs than 17 year olds, and also much less likely to access social media, simply suggests that older teens use both social networking sites and substances more than 12 year olds. Furthermore, Males (2011) stated that CASA refused scholarly requests to provide additional information on its data analysis, including survey responses by age for the key behaviors it reported. Hanson (2011) concluded: "CASA has a long and continuing history of presenting erroneous statistics and deceptive assertions to promote its agenda."

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING POLICIES IN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

School districts have been provided with few guidelines for the establishment of sound social networking policies. Therefore, policies regarding the use of social media tend to vary greatly between districts. The challenge for school districts is to write policies that address potentially harmful online interactions while allowing students to benefit from the use of social networking sites. In addition, researchers caution that boilerplate policies that ban specific social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter, may limit the ability of students and teachers to collaborate across schools, districts, states, and countries (Bosco, 2011; Bumgardner & Knestis, 2011; Stout, 2011a; Stout, 2011b).

Researchers suggest that school districts consider the following recommendations when they are establishing social networking policies.

- **Develop an appropriate use policy for social networking.** An educational networking committee consisting of members from all stakeholder groups (students, teachers, administrators, parents, and members of the community) should be established to help create the social networking policy. The policy, built on the district's existing Internet safety policy, should be disseminated to schools prior to program implementation. Content should be specific to the networking platform chosen and should include instructions to teachers regarding how to manage all aspects of the social networking environment, such as cyberbullying, advertisements, and inappropriate postings. Some districts choose to distinguish between the restrictiveness appropriate for older and younger students (Bosco, 2011; Goldfarb et al., 2011).

The policy should include the following elements:

- a description of the goals of social networking in the classroom;
- an explanation of how social networking is aligned with the curriculum;
- information about how other school policies also apply to social networking sites;
- clarification of the limits of privacy in online environments;
- a clear statement of expected online student and staff behaviors;
- guidance for teachers, administrators, and parents on how to manage inappropriate behavior;
- guidance for teachers on how to maintain their personal privacy and serve as an example of

- appropriate social networking behavior;
- a statement specifying that social contact between students and educators is discouraged or prohibited;
- instructions regarding how social networking sites are to be monitored; and
- a description of how skills and abilities related to social networking will be assessed (Donlin, 2011; Goldfarb et al., 2011; School Principals and Social Networking in Education Survey, 2010).

Students, teachers, and administrators should be reminded that the rules that apply to bricks-and-mortar classrooms and schools also apply to the online, social networking environment. Examples include rules regarding bullying, harassment, courtesy, appropriate language, honesty, and timeliness (Donlin, 2011).

- **Develop strategies for preventing, identifying, and responding to cyberbullying.** Hinduja and Patchin (2010) noted that parents often say they do not have the technical skills to keep up with their children's online behavior; teachers hesitate to intervene in behaviors that occur away from school; and law enforcement does not get involved unless there is clear evidence of a crime or a significant threat to a student's physical safety. As a result, cyberbullying often slips through the cracks. Hinduja and Patchin (2010) recommend that school districts engage in the following practices to prevent cyberbullying:

- Educate the school community about responsible Internet use. Students need to know that all forms of bullying are unacceptable and that those who engage in these behaviors will be subject to discipline.
- Establish and maintain a climate of respect and integrity in every school where violations result in sanctions. An environment should be created in which students feel comfortable talking with adults about cyberbullying and feel confident that meaningful steps will be taken to resolve the situation.
- Review existing bullying policies to see if they allow for the discipline of students who engage in cyberbullying. If so, cyberbullying incidents that occur at school (or that originate off school property but result in a substantial disruption of the learning environment) are within a school's legal authority to intervene.
- Develop creative strategies for deterring cyberbullying. For example, students can create anti-cyberbullying posters to be displayed throughout schools. Older students might be required to give presentations to younger students about what to do if they are cyberbullied or witness cyberbullying.

When cyberbullying does occur, schools and districts must thoroughly investigate all incidents and respond in a manner that is commensurate with the harm done and the disruption that occurred. The majority of incidents can be handled informally; for example, by calling parents, counseling the bully and the target, and expressing condemnation of the behavior. However, there are occasions where a formal response is required, such as when incidents involve serious threats toward another student, when the target does not feel comfortable coming to school, or when cyberbullying continues after informal attempts to stop it have failed. In these cases, detention, suspension, or even expulsion may be necessary. If these more extreme measures are required, it is important that educators are able to clearly demonstrate a link to the school site and present evidence that supports their actions (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

To learn more about identifying, preventing, and responding to cyberbullying, the interested reader is referred to the Cyberbullying Research Center (www.cyberbullying.us/index.php). This information clearinghouse provides research findings, fact sheets, tips and strategies, current news headlines on the topic, online quizzes, and a number of other helpful resources. It also contains downloadable

materials for educators, counselors, parents, law enforcement officers, and other youth-serving professionals to use and distribute as needed.

In response to concerns about cyberbullying, Facebook has teamed up with the National PTA to establish a program that provides students, parents, and teachers with information about how to reduce the risk of cyberbullying and advance Internet safety and security. The two organizations now provide this information and additional resources on their respective websites and through the PTA's 24,000 local chapters (Huffington Post, 2011; Gynn, 2010).

- **Adhere to federal guidelines governing students' Internet use.** The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) is the key federal law affecting technology use in schools. The law requires any school district that receives E-Rate funding to filter or block material that is harmful to minors and visual depictions that are obscene or contain pornography. Although districts are permitted to adopt social networking within the confines of CIPA regulations, they tend to be extremely cautious regarding student safety. Over half of the nation's school districts have Internet filtering systems that are stricter than those required by CIPA (Bosco, 2011; Goldfarb et al., 2011).

The Protecting Children in the 21st Century Act, signed into law in 2008, adds statutory language to existing rules for CIPA implementation. By July 1, 2012, school districts will have to create or update current Internet Use policies to include wording that they are teaching Internet safety. Cyberbullying awareness and response will need to be included within existing harassment, intimidation, and bullying policies. It is important that teachers, content area specialists, counselors, and educational technologists work together to create effective and all-encompassing digital safety education programs (Donlin, 2011).

School districts must also pay close attention to federal laws like the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, which seeks to protect children's privacy and bars most children under the age of 13 from participating in many social networking sites, and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, which protects the privacy of student information (Donlin, 2011; Davis, 2010).

- **Start with a pilot program.** Schools chosen for the social networking pilot program should demonstrate a willingness to participate in the project and an endorsement of the use of social media in the classroom. All students in the pilot schools must have access to computers in order to alleviate issues of equity. Teacher training resources should be provided to ensure that teachers understand the technology and can use it to maximum benefit (Goldfarb et al., 2011).
- **Ensure that students have equal access to computers.** One of the benefits of social networking is that learning extends beyond classroom hours. But school districts must ensure that all students have equal access to a computer and the Internet, either in their school, at home, or at public libraries. Educators also have to consider the impromptu exchanges and instant access that are characteristic of social networking when determining equity (Lee, 2012; Goldfarb et al., 2011; Roper, 2010; National School Boards Association, 2007).
- **Do not rely exclusively on software to block access to unacceptable websites.** Some school districts rely on blocking and filtering software to protect students from harassment, offensive material, and inappropriate websites. However, researchers agree that relying solely on software solutions to block access to unacceptable sites does not prevent student involvement on these sites. Many students carry their own mobile devices on which they can access blocked sites and blocking software installed on school computers is often easily circumvented by motivated adolescents (Bosco, 2011; Willard, 2006). In fact, the Cyberbullying Research Center (2012) reported that school district use of filtering software is not significantly related to a decreased chance of students falling victim to Internet harassment. Experts suggest that instead of an across-the-board ban on social networking sites,

school staff should increase their monitoring of students' social media usage. They contend that the false security that has been generated through reliance on blocking and filtering tools has undermined the establishment of effective education and supervision practices both at school and at home (Willard, 2006).

- **Try out different social networking sites.** Educators and policymakers should try out the social networking websites that students are using so their decisions about these tools are based on real experiences (National School Boards Association, 2007). Brady (2010) reported that educators who had already joined a social networking site were much more positive and receptive to their educational value.
- **Consider using specially designed education-based social networking sites.** As concerns mount over student safety and potential security risks associated with commercial social networking sites, a growing number of non-commercial, education-based social networking sites are emerging. These sites capitalize on the enormous popularity of online social networking, but address concerns regarding the protection of student privacy and safety commonly associated with commercially-based social networking sites. These alternative sites are more suitable for classroom use for the following reasons:
 - Teachers have much greater control over the access and use of these sites.
 - For the most part, these sites are free of advertisements, marketing exploits, or malware tricks.
 - The sites are set up so that teachers are able to moderate content. In addition, some of the sites document changes, additions, and history in such a way that teachers have valuable access to student contributions and progress.
 - Privacy is much easier to safeguard using these social networking tools (Bosco, 2011; Fodeman & Monroe, 2011; Walsh, 2011b; Brady, 2010; Holcomb et al., 2010; Klopfer et al., 2009).

Examples of education-based social networking sites include Ning in Education and YouTube for Schools. Ning allows teachers to create their own social networking space. Although it shares many of the same attributes found on commercial social networking sites, including comment walls, friends, and photo sharing, Ning provides a considerably smaller and more private group setting. Teachers designate who may and who may not participate in the social network. The platform also allows teachers to enable or disable specific parameters, such as chat and messaging, if desired. Drawbacks to educational social networking sites such as Ning include:

- Since most teachers and students are unfamiliar with the site, they may use it less often than they would use more popular social networking sites.
- Because educational social networking sites are used exclusively for school, students are more likely to equate use of the site with “homework” (Goldfarb et al., 2011; Holcomb et al., 2010; Klopfer et al., 2009).

In December 2011, YouTube partnered with over 600 organizations and educators to create a new network that allows access only to content that can be used in the classroom. The network, YouTube for Schools, provides trustworthy, vetted educational materials that teachers can access and use in their classrooms. The site automatically disables certain features, such as the ability to comment on posted videos. YouTube for Schools is free and has over 500,000 videos for educators to choose from at the kindergarten to university level, as well as specialized content in subject areas such as biology, mathematics, and ancient history. Video content is organized into the categories “elementary,” “middle school,” and “high school” and then subdivided by subject. Teachers can also create customized playlists of videos from the mainstream YouTube website (Power, 2012; Marcus, 2011; Mitchell, 2011; Sniderman, 2011).

- **Provide teachers with training on the use of social networking in the classroom.** Ample time and funding must be provided so that teachers can participate in extensive professional development. Teachers need to be trained to use social media effectively in their classrooms. They need to understand how to engage students in educationally enriching activities, the risks associated with using social networking in the classroom, and the appropriate standards for its use. Promising practices and corresponding lesson plans should be disseminated to help teachers integrate social networking into the curriculum (Goldfarb et al., 2011; Willard, 2006). Foulger and colleagues (2009) found that although a number of pre-service teaching majors engaged in social networking, many of them lacked knowledge of ethical standards and guidelines to govern its use.
- **Develop strict guidelines for student-teacher communications.** Most districts require that teachers and students refrain from becoming friends or otherwise associating on social networking sites to prevent improper fraternization. In most cases, teachers are permitted to communicate with students through district-affiliated social networking sites, such as a Facebook page that is dedicated to academics but does not include private information about the teacher. Districts usually advise teachers to keep their personal and professional/educational accounts separate (Brindley, 2012; Donlin, 2011; Goldfarb et al., 2011; Saunders, 2011; Stout, 2011a; Downing & Shannon, 2010). Examples of school district policies regarding student-teacher communication include:
 - In Ohio, Dayton Public Schools restricts teachers from using social networking sites to communicate with students. The policy also forbids teachers from using text messages or instant messaging to engage in private conversations. Teachers are even prohibited from responding to communication attempts made by students via social media or other non-approved methods of online communication (Course Cracker, 2011).
 - Missouri educators are prohibited from using social networking sites to communicate privately with students. The law states: “No teacher shall establish, maintain, or use a work-related Internet site unless such site is available to school administrators and parents.” In other words, teachers are not permitted to have conversations with students using direct messaging or chat, but communication is permitted on publicly accessible pages (Course Cracker, 2011; Magid, 2011).
 - In Illinois, Springfield Public Schools allows teachers to communicate with students through district-affiliated social networking sites, such as a Facebook page that is dedicated to academics, but does not include private information about the teacher. Teachers cannot post confidential information about students, including pictures, test scores, or samples of school work. Teachers’ educational sites must be “walled off” from their personal sites so that students do not have access to any part of a teacher’s personal site (Saunders, 2011).
 - Social networking rules in Georgia’s Barrow County School System ban communications between students and teachers except when the conversations are part of a school-sanctioned educational program. Most other Georgia school systems do not have a policy regulating the way teachers use Facebook, but instead rely on the broader code of ethics enforced by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission to ensure that teachers act professionally (Melancon, 2012).
 - In Nashua, New Hampshire, schools use the T.A.P. measurement as a gauge for determining appropriate communications between students and teachers on Facebook: transparent, accessible, and professional (Brindley, 2012).
- **Maintain parent and community trust.** A Yahoo survey of over 2,000 Internet users, ages 18 to 64, found that 78 percent of parents are concerned about their children’s online safety (Guynn,

2010; Washington State Office of the Attorney General, 2010). Parents and communities count on educators to protect students during the school day and rely on them to keep their children safe when they are online. At the same time, they expect schools to take advantage of new technological tools. The National School Boards Association (2007), therefore, recommended that school districts approach social networking with thoughtful policies that maintain parent and community trust.

The Young Adult Library Services Association (2011) suggested that schools play an active role in educating parents and community members about the benefits of social networking. The Association recommended activities such as:

- Creating podcasts and information sheets to inform parents and community members about how social networking sites allow schools and libraries to integrate technology in meaningful ways.
- Distributing brochures and posting information online that explains how schools ensure students' online safety.
- Creating an online demonstration or class that gives adults the chance to test out and discuss social networking technologies.
- Inviting parents and community members to workshops where they can learn about social networking tools. Teachers can discuss how social networking is being used in the classroom; law enforcement officials can talk about how to help children and teens stay safe while participating in social networking; and students themselves can demonstrate the positive ways they use social networking tools. Schools can also host a session for adults to learn how to use social networking sites.

EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL NETWORKING ACTIVITIES IN SCHOOLS

In some schools, social networking has changed the way educators teach and students learn. Following are examples of how social networking has been incorporated into educational activities.

- Teachers create a class page on Facebook, where they post assignments, share video presentations, and engage in class discussions (Archer & Eger, 2012; Stout, 2011a).
- Teachers set up study groups that allow students to collaborate outside of the classroom, create to-do lists, set up meeting times, work on group projects, prepare for tests, and share notes online (Sullivan, 2010).
- Students post homework questions or answers on blogs at any time of the day or night. For example, creation of a math blog at several schools in North Carolina enabled struggling students to find other students who were willing to help them or even post a video of the best way to solve a complex math problem (Davis, 2010).
- Students post book reports on a blog for their peers, parents, and other teachers to read and provide feedback. Educators have found that when students know that someone other than just their teacher is going to read the report, they take the assignment more seriously (Sorrentino, 2012).
- Teachers record students' PowerPoint presentations and post them on social networks for students to refer back to as study guides (Su, 2011).
- Teachers set up meetings between their class and other classes from around the world using Skype. In one school, students were assigned different jobs during the calls. For example, one student was a photographer, documenting the meeting; another student placed the location of the class they were speaking with on a Google map; another student served as a Twitter "backchanneler," sending out tweets during the live event; and "fact checkers" made sure the information provided was correct (Davis, 2010).

- School staff put middle and high school students in touch with college students, who act as role models and set a positive example for youth to follow (Lee, 2012).
- Teachers film themselves when they are going to be absent so substitute teachers can show the YouTube videos to their classes (Archer & Eger, 2012).
- Teachers create and capture science experiments on video using YouTube (Power, 2012).
- Students take interactive quizzes on YouTube. For example, teachers can post videos that prompt students to answer questions based on the materials they are watching (Power, 2012).
- Teachers work with students to create and upload their own videos on YouTube (O'Neal, 2006).
- Students upload a writing assignment they are working on and collaboratively edit the assignment with another classroom. Teachers can also ask guest editors to participate in the process. While students are writing and editing, they can compare points of view and engage in online debates (Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies, 2009).
- Using a tool such as Google Documents, students create a survey that is administered to all of the students in their class. The data are then collected for analysis on a single spreadsheet (Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies, 2009).
- Teachers ask students to read a book chapter and then post their brief summary of the key points on Twitter. Wheeler (2009) noted that limiting a summary to 140 characters requires a lot of academic discipline.
- Students choose a famous person from the past and create a Twitter account for him or her. They then write regular tweets in the role of the character, in a style and using the vocabulary they think the person would have used (Wheeler, 2009).
- Students practice a foreign language by connecting with native speakers through groups on Facebook (Online Colleges, 2009).
- Students follow news feeds on Facebook that are relevant to the course material (Online Colleges, 2009).
- Staff create an official school Facebook page to keep students, parents, and the community updated on academic achievements, school events, sporting matches, and extracurricular activities (Fodeman & Monroe, 2011; Huffington Post, 2011; Stout, 2011a; Davis, 2010).
- Schools use blogging software to publish their newspapers. The blog format allows for timely publication and the ability to make frequent updates. Readers can easily post comments (Young Adult Library Services Association, 2011).
- Parents and teachers communicate through Facebook. Since many parents are already using social media, it is often easier to contact them using these sites than through telephone or email (Fodeman & Monroe, 2011; Stout, 2011a).

ON A LOCAL NOTE

Miami-Dade County Public Schools' (M-DCPS) Network and Internet Responsible Use Policies are in the process of being updated for both staff and students. These policies establish responsible and acceptable use of the District's network, including social media, as a tool for learning. The policies clearly state that use

of the District's network while on school property must adhere to the requirements put forth by E-rate, support and be consistent with the educational objectives of the District, and comply with all applicable codes of conduct. The two policies - *Student Network and Internet Responsible Use and Safety* and *Staff Network and Internet Responsible Use and Safety* - contain sections that detail District monitoring of user accounts, network etiquette, security measures, and procedures for use. All users are reminded that use of the District's network is a privilege, not a right, and that any unacceptable use may be subject to appropriate disciplinary action.

The *Student Network and Internet Responsible Use and Safety* policy states that students must always get permission from their teachers or facilitators before using the network or accessing any file or application. Specifically, accessing chat rooms or instant messaging while using the District network is prohibited; downloading materials without authorization and without confirmation that they are not copyrighted is prohibited; and downloading games and files or running streaming media without educational value and without authorization by a teacher or a local administrator is prohibited. In addition, the policy specifies that the use of Internet tools such as blogs and discussion boards are intended for educational purposes only. The policy states that disciplinary action for inappropriate use will be based on the tiered actions described in the Codes of Student Conduct and may include, but is not limited to, loss of privilege, suspension, or expulsion. As part of M-DCPS' proposed Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) initiative, described later in this section, students will be permitted to connect to their devices only through the District's filtered wireless network. Connecting to broadband services for data access during school hours without approval and direction is prohibited.

The *Staff Network and Internet Responsible Use and Safety* policy states that teachers are responsible for guiding student access to appropriate websites, teaching students about online safety and security, and ensuring that students understand that if they misuse the network they will lose their privilege to access the Internet from the classroom environment. The District requires that staff members participate in professional development programs that include the safety and security of students while using electronic communications; the inherent danger of students disclosing personally identifiable information online; and the consequences of unauthorized access, cyberbullying, and other unlawful or inappropriate activities by students or staff online. As part of M-DCPS' BYOD initiative, the policy states that staff may only connect personally owned devices to the District's filtered wireless network for data access during instructional time. Connecting to broadband services will be prohibited unless there is a specific instructional purpose for doing so. Teachers will be required to instruct students to only connect their devices to the District's filtered wireless network for data access during school hours.

District staff are reminded that in the BYOD environment their personal or private use of social media may have unintended consequences. Employees may not post material of any nature that violates School Board policies involving employee conduct, that violates state or federal law, or that serves to disrupt the school environment. As in all other forms of contact between staff and students, inappropriate communications between them using social media is prohibited. The District discourages staff from "friending" students or engaging in personal and private communications with students. If inappropriate contact is found to have occurred, appropriate disciplinary action will take place. In addition, federal and state confidentiality laws forbid schools and their employees from using or disclosing personally identifiable student information and information contained in student education records without parental consent.

M-DCPS is currently in the process of implementing a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) initiative. BYOD refers to users bringing their own mobile computing device to school. These devices can include but are not limited to iPads, smart phones, laptop computers, netbooks, tablets, and MP3 players. The BYOD initiative is taking place to bring the District closer to a one-to-one computer experience. The current state of technology at M-DCPS is ready for a BYOD initiative within current policies, infrastructure, and online Portal technology. The District has over 20 schools with campus-wide wireless capabilities and an additional 56 schools with wireless hot spots. The BYOD model already exists at one high school, TERRA. Locally raised donations to the E-rate

funding campaign, "Bringing Wireless to the Classroom," were matched by federal dollars and will be used to connect schools via wi-fi.

The District uses an Internet Content Filter to prevent user access to prohibited material on the Internet. Content filters attempt to block obscene and objectionable material, including sites with adult content, nudity, and gambling, as well as sites advocating violence and illegal activities. However, no content filter is ever 100 percent accurate and on occasion either objectionable materials may get through or non-objectionable material may be blocked. Bypassing the District content filter without authorization is strictly prohibited. The District has procedures in place to evaluate requests from users to block or unblock sites as necessary. Students, parents, and staff must be aware that connection to any Internet or network provider not under District control may be unfiltered. The District's Responsible Use Policies state that students are only permitted to connect to the District's filtered wireless network. Connecting to broadband services during class time without approval and direction is prohibited. The District is currently reviewing filtering packages that will provide more granular approaches to filtering, including age and grade appropriateness,

The School Board of Miami-Dade County prohibits bullying and harassment. M-DCPS' policy against bullying and harassment covers all forms of bullying, including physical bullying, cyberbullying, and cyberstalking. Cyberbullying is defined as "the willful and repeated harassment and intimidation of an individual through the use of electronic mail or electronic communication with the intent to coerce, intimidate, harass, or cause substantial emotional distress to a person." Cyberstalking is defined as engaging in "a course of conduct to communicate, or cause to be communicated, words, images, or language by or through the use of electronic mail or electronic communication, directed at a specific person, causing substantial emotional distress to that person and serving no legitimate purpose." M-DCPS' Bullying and Harassment policy stipulates that the District will provide education in bullying awareness and prevention in order to promote a school atmosphere in which bullying, harassment, and intimidation are not tolerated by students, employees, visitors, or volunteers. The policy includes the following sections:

- A description of the type of behavior expected from each student and employee.
- Consequences for any student or employee who commits an act of bullying or harassment.
- Consequences for any student or employee who is found to have wrongfully and intentionally accused another of an act of bullying or harassment.
- A detailed procedure for reporting an act of bullying or harassment, including provisions that permit a person to anonymously report such an act.
- A detailed procedure for the prompt investigation of a report of bullying or harassment.
- A procedure for providing instruction to students, parents, teachers, school administrators, counseling staff, and school volunteers on preventing, identifying, and responding to bullying or harassment.

Cyberbullying is also addressed in the District's Network and Internet Responsible Use policies. Both student and staff policies specify that it is the District's responsibility to protect to the fullest extent possible the safety and well-being of its students. The policies state that cyberbullying is prohibited at all times, on campus or off, whether it is done using District-owned equipment and networks or personally owned equipment and broadband connection plans. Students are required to report any knowledge they have of cyberbullying activities immediately to school staff. Reports of cyberbullying must be acted on by staff as soon as possible. Teachers are required to participate in professional development programs that include the consequences of cyberbullying.

SUMMARY

Many school districts in the U.S. are struggling with questions about the use of social networking as an educational tool. The majority of districts have limited the in-school use of social networking technology, based on fears that students will be exposed to inappropriate online content, unwanted adult interactions, and bullying from peers. On the other hand, proponents of education-based social networking argue that the educational benefits of social media far outweigh the risks. This Information Capsule summarized the benefits and risks associated with classroom-based social networking. Benefits include incorporation of students' preferred learning styles into instruction; early recognition of students' learning needs; enhanced communication; creation of a collaborative atmosphere; and increased student engagement. Risks associated with education-based social networking include cyberbullying, exposure to offensive material, invasion of privacy, and reduced opportunities for face-to-face communication.

Social networking in the classroom is a relatively new phenomenon so very little research has been conducted to determine its impact on student learning. Several studies have found that social networking promotes the development of students' collaborative and problem-solving skills. Research on the impact of social media on students' academic performance is just beginning to emerge, but to date has focused mainly on university students. Two of these studies reported no relationship between social media usage and grade point averages and one study found that students using social media spent less time studying and had lower grade point averages. More research is clearly needed to determine how social networking sites complement the educational environment and how they affect more traditional approaches to education, especially at the K-12 level.

Few guidelines have been published to help school districts establish social networking policies. Therefore, policies regarding use of social media tend to vary greatly between districts. This report provides recommendations for school districts to follow when they are establishing social networking policies, such as developing strategies for preventing, identifying, and responding to cyberbullying; starting with a pilot program; ensuring that students have equal access to computers; using specially designed education-based social networking sites; providing teachers with training on the use of social networking in the classroom; and maintaining parent and community trust.

This Information Capsule also included examples of the ways in which social networking activities are currently being used in schools. Education-based social networking activities include creating class pages; forming study groups; creating homework blogs; posting student assignments for peer review; posting student presentations to serve as study guides; connecting with classrooms from around the world; creating and posting videos; practicing a foreign language with native speakers; and following news feeds that are relevant to course material.

This report also included a summary of Miami-Dade County Public Schools' Network and Internet Responsible Use Policies, along with information on the District's proposed Bring Your Own Device initiative, Internet Content Filter, and Bullying and Harassment Policy.

In conclusion, social networking sites are part of today's culture and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Some educators are reconsidering their earlier prohibition of social networking. They are now embracing the technology their students already use outside of the classroom and including it as an instructional tool to promote academic learning. Although social networking sites may expose students to potential risks and difficulties, early studies suggest that they increase student engagement and can support learning. Rather than an across-the-board ban on the use of social networking in the classroom, a more judicious response may be for school districts to develop strong social networking policies that address potentially harmful online interactions and provide educators and students with guidance and oversight in the use of social media. Non-commercial education-based social networking sites, which provide teachers with greater control over access and contain more privacy safeguards, hold promise for school districts attempting to strike a balance between unfettered access to social media and its complete exclusion from classrooms.

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