The Federation of
Parents and Friends Associations
of Catholic Schools in Queensland

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

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This guide offers information to parents and caregivers about the use of social media by Parents and Friends Associations in Queensland Catholic schools.

Social media allows us to communicate easily and quickly with our communities. It helps us tell our story and shows that we welcome and value the input of the members of our communities. While these technologies provide positive platforms for sharing ideas, they also have the potential to cause pain and suffering to individuals, schools or even whole communities.

Because social media can reach a very wide audience, reputation management and careful planning are very important in setting up and running social media accounts. This means that having a social media accounts require supervision by moderators and a significant amount of time, effort and consultation.

Reputations of teachers, schools, principals and even parents can be permanently damaged — and in some cases, serious instances of inappropriate online behaviour are dealt with by police and the court system.

SCHOOL POLICY

Diocesan education offices and many schools have policies about the set up and use of social media. Any public use of the school's name or the school's logo or crest must have the agreement of the principal. These guidelines must be read in conjunction with your school's policy and the Diocese's policies. **Talk to your principal first**.

PURPOSE OF SOCIAL MEDIA SITES

Social media sites should form part of an integrated communications, marketing and engagement strategy. When considering the establishment of a site, ask these questions
What is our purpose in having this site?
Does the school already have a social media site that fulfils the same need?
If so, can we collaborate with the school using this existing channel?

There needs to be an identifiable communications and engagement objective for using any particular social media channel. This purpose will also identify which social media channel will be the most appropriate.

For Parents and Friends Associations it is considered that Facebook is generally the most appropriate social media channel as it has the broadest reach and allows the P&F to exercise an appropriate degree of control over what may be posted.

MANAGING COMMENTS MADE BY USERS

Social media is all about the 'two-way conversation', so readers should be encouraged to comment about your posts. We expect that the vast majority of comments will be positive, but some users will make negative, defamatory or abusive comments. It is the role of the moderators to take action on such comments.

In recent years Facebook has made changes to the way administrators can review and, if necessary, delete offensive posts. Moderators should be aware (or become aware) of the tools and options for managing your Facebook presence such as reviewing, hiding, disabling and approving comments and posts.

There is also an option for those who aren't going for a 'review first' approach to moderate through flagging a self-chosen word list i.e. hate, principal, class, teacher, child etc. A profanity filter can also be activated.

Any defamatory or abusive comments (and those containing profanities) should simply be deleted as soon as possible. (Bear in mind that the comment may have been viewed by others before deletion, and people may have reposted it elsewhere.)

If a question is asked, the best response is the correct answer to that question, or to seek further clarification or invite the poster to make contact with a staff member at the school or diocesan education office.

If a poster makes a complaint, the best response is to thank the poster for raising the issue and then either (a) deal with the substance of the complaint if it is simple and easily answerable online and does not relate to the personal information of specific individuals; or (b) invite the poster to make contact with a particular staff member so that the issue can be properly dealt with. This shows that the P&F or school is responsive to feedback and willing to engage in constructive dialogue with parents and other community members.

Some sites (such as Facebook) also allow the moderator to permanently block particular individuals from commenting. This should be done if a person repeatedly seeks to make comments that are defamatory, offensive or abusive.

CONTROL AND MODERATION

Moderators must be appointed for each social media site. The moderators assist with the workload of posting material and reviewing comments that are made.

It should be remembered that social media is a 24 hours-per-day, seven days-per-week operation, so a member of the moderation team should always be available to review your site and take action to deal with anything inappropriate. Facebook (for example) regularly updates its privacy settings so administrators should regularly check these to keep up to date.

Defamatory and offensive comments must be removed immediately. Negative comments should be addressed appropriately (see below) as this is a key aspect of the social media "conversation".

The moderator must check that all images appearing on the site are covered by the appropriate level of media consent. This means that students whose images are used must only be those for whom the broadest level of consent has been given. If you are unsure do not use the image.

POSTS AND COMMENTS ON POSTS

To ensure that social media posts are aligned with your communications objectives, only members of the moderation team should have permission to initiate new posts on your site. This includes the posting of photographs and videos.

Be aware that your social media represents both your school and your P & F. So please be careful when you share or like any content and/or other facebook pages because this is a public reflection of your whole school community.

As social media is intended to be interactive, it is important to allow users to interact with posts, by 'liking' posts or by making comments on posts. Without this ability, your social media site is simply another website with one-way communication. The interactive function of social media does necessitate moderation, however, to ensure the integrity of your site.

ACCESS

The level of access offered by different social media platforms varies.

With a Facebook page, for example, you can choose between making the page viewable by all, or only by your registered 'followers'. Creation of a 'closed group' (access by request or by invitation) is possible and may be appropriate at times, but this may also cause some people to feel excluded. Be aware that you cannot retrospectively change a page to a group. Your page type or category requires careful consideration and the full involvement of the principal.

Each option has different advantages and disadvantages and the right choice for you will depend on your objectives for each site – is your page intended to communicate with the broad community, or just with current families, or members of your Diocesan Council, Parents and Friends Associations or alumni?

- **Instagram** is a platform with access protocols that are similar to Facebook.
- **Twitter** is largely an open system with access for all and few controls
- **YouTube** generally is open to all, though it is possible to have private channels which are not searchable by the public.
- **Snapchat** is an image messaging and multimedia (i.e. live streaming) mobile app, with post being temporary. It is **not recommended** for the education sector.

- **Linkedin** is a business network that is generally employment-orientated, with some schools using it to seek out and keep in touch with their alumni.

Facebook, Instagram and YouTube all allow you (as the moderator) to customise the ways in which users may interact with your posts. **As a general rule, you should allow – and actively ask - users to 'like' your posts/photos/videos, share where appropriate and to make comments about them.** This is why moderation is important, to ensure that any inappropriate comments are removed in a timely manner.

USE OF IMAGES - PRIVACY

You must be aware of and comply with the school and media consent requirements. In line with *Media Consent* requirements, the names or identifiable photographs of only those students with *Wider Community* media consent should be posted on social media sites that are publicly accessible.

Whilst these sites will be accessed primarily by members of the school community, they are publicly accessible and posts from these sites may be shared/copied and appear on other pages or sites.

SHARING AND REPOSTING

It is important for site moderators to be aware that viewers of sites may share/copy/repost anything which appears on the site. Therefore, nothing should be posted on your site that is confidential or which you would not want made public.

Equally, it is important that parents be made aware that the school has no control over how others may use any posts on their sites, i.e. that the P&F has no control over how other parents or other users may repost or use the information or images which appear on the page.

ACCEPTABLE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA SITES

All users of social media must avoid posting anything which is obscene, defamatory, offensive or untrue. Party political posts and those which seek to ridicule or belittle the school, staff, the P&F Association or its members, and the Catholic Church or its beliefs should also be avoided. Users should understand that any people engaging in such behaviour will have their posts removed and their access to the social media sites restricted.

Anyone encountering material on the P&F social media site which they believe is in breach of these guidelines should report such material to the moderator or the principal or, report such comments to the site moderator through the site itself.

IF YOUR P&F IS CONSIDERING USING SOCIAL MEDIA, FOLLOW THESE STEPS

1. **Talk to your principal first.** The principal is the manager of the school and is ultimately accountable for the school and its public reputation. The Principal will also be aware of a much wider range of public and private matters relating to the school than you or other members of the school community.
2. Read and comply with the **social media policies** of the school and the diocesan education office.
3. Have a clear **purpose** for using social media. Discuss it, agree on it and write it down.
4. Facebook pages should be set up using the Company, Organisation or Institution category.
5. Always **be positive** and constructive
6. Appoint administrators and **actively monitor** the social media sites
7. Develop procedures for P&F and moderators. Document the roles and the names of people holding the roles with lists of log-in details. Store at the school and/or with the principal.
8. Personal channels are better for personal matters. Social media are public community sites and should not be used for raising or resolving individual or personal matters.
9. **Privacy** requirements must be strictly adhered to.

TIPS FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Being aware of a few simple strategies can help keep the use of social media positive and constructive:

- Before you post something online, ask yourself if the community or individual really need to know. Is it relevant, positive and helpful?
- Remember that what you post online is a direct reflection of you. People will potentially form lasting opinions of you based on what you post online.
- Be a good role model. If things get heated online consider logging out and taking a few moments to relax and think. Hasty, emotive responses could inflame situations unnecessarily.
- Be mindful when commenting, try to keep general and avoid posting anything that could identify individuals.
- A few years ago parents may have discussed concerns or issues with their friends at the school gate. Today, using social media, online discussions between you and your close friends can very quickly be shared with a much wider audience, potentially far larger than intended.
- Taking a few moments to think about the content you are about to post could save upset, embarrassment, and possible legal action.

- As a parent you have a role in supervising and regulating your child's online activities at home and its impact on the reputation and privacy of others. Parents are their child's first teachers — so children will learn online behaviours from you.

Is it appropriate to comment or post about the school, staff or students?

- Parental and community feedback is important for schools. If you have a compliment, complaint or enquiry about an issue at school, the best approach is to speak directly to the school about the matter, rather than discussing it in a public forum.
- While many schools use social media to update parents of school notices, it is preferable that parents contact schools directly with a compliment, complaint or enquiry due to privacy considerations. Imagine if your doctor, accountant or banking institution tried to contact you to discuss important matters via Facebook.
- If you have raised an issue with a school or know that another person has, please refrain from discussing those details on social media, particularly the names of anyone involved.
- Keep comments calm and polite, just as you would over the telephone or by email.
- If you encounter negative or derogatory content online which involves the school, hinders a child's learning and/or affects the school community at large, contact the school principal.

POSSIBLE CIVIL OR CRIMINAL RAMIFICATIONS OF ONLINE COMMENTARY

A serious instance of inappropriate online behaviour may constitute a criminal offence and become a police matter. For example, online content may substantiate the offence of 'using a carriage service to menace, harass or cause offence' (Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth) s. 474.17). School staff may contact their union or obtain personal legal advice if they feel that online content seriously impacts their reputation. Defamatory online content may give rise to litigation under the Defamation Act 2005 (Qld).

WHAT IF I ENCOUNTER PROBLEM CONTENT?

Taking the following steps may help resolve the issue in a constructive way:

- refrain from responding
- take a screen capture or print a copy of the concerning online content
- if you consider problem content to be explicit, pornographic or exploitative of minors, you should keep a record of the URL of the page containing that content but NOT print or share it. The URL can be provided to the school principal, or police, as needed for escalation of serious concerns
- report the content as soon as possible to the moderator and/or principal.