

## Policy for:

Dealing with complaints against schools by parents/guardians on social networking sites



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## Dealing with complaints by parents/guardians on social networking sites.

### Introduction

The increasing number of people using social networking sites has had both a positive and adverse effect on the reputation of schools in local communities. Some schools have used it as an efficient tool, eg to forward information through Facebook and Twitter, and stakeholders have responded well to this dialogue with school. However, in some cases, parents have bypassed the school's complaints procedures and taken to social networking sites to criticise and, in some cases, make malicious comments about individual members of staff or decisions that have been taken by the Headteacher.

In many ways, the use of social networking sites to express these opinions is an extension of how people can express their views on the internet. People use sites such as 'Trip Advisor' to review holiday accommodation and 'Amazon' to give assessments of particular products.

However, remarks made about school can be destabilising for a community and, in particular, for the professional status of staff members who have had allegations made against them. It can also lead to a 'whispering campaign' which can undermine the leadership of the Headteacher and the Governing Board. More often than enough, Facebook messages do not provide readers with the full facts and the whole picture - hence, the one sided nature of the Facebook content is not a true reflection of the situation or circumstances.

The key question is: *How do schools respond to complaints made on social networking sites?*

The vast number of social media profiles and pages means that it can be very hard for a school to monitor issues that are being discussed by parents and guardians. One example was at a primary school where a rumour that a pupil had swine flu which was shared by a number of parents through social media. On the Monday morning, when the Headteacher opened the doors for the start of the school week, he/she found that there were only a handful of children in the playground. As a result, school staff had to walk around the local community to quash these rumours and persuade parents to send their children to school.

There is no single effective method of dealing with parents and guardians who raise issues on social networking sites. However, school can take, and must take, a proactive approach to minimise such incidents rather than having to be reactive and put together a quick response to stop the spread of rumours.

This short guide gives us a number of processes a Headteacher can use to deal with any problems and it looks at ways to counter any repeat occurrences to ensure that parents and guardians follow the traditional complaints procedures in school.

### 1. Gather evidence

When the school becomes aware of any information that is damaging towards an individual member of staff and/or the school community, it is important to gather evidence and establish what exactly has been posted. This may have to be done through various methods as the information may have only been shared through the connections of specific people. However, it is important that verbal or written evidence be submitted so that the facts can be established.

In some cases, a group of parents may set up a site to criticise the school or individual members. This is usually done through a Facebook page which is then 'liked' by those with an account and discussions then take place through particular threads. In this case, it is important to find out who has set up the page, as usually this is the parent or guardian who has the grievance. It is also essential, at this stage, that members of staff (including non-teaching staff) do not become embroiled in any of the discussion threads as this sometimes can inflame the situation.

## 2. Reassure staff

The appearance of comments on social networking sites that make allegations (both 'open' and 'hidden/suggested') about the school or individual members of staff can be very intimidating to the workforce. Sometimes the content of the posts can demotivate staff and cause anxiety and stress. It is vital that the Headteacher reassures all staff and offers support through whole staff meetings or individual discussions. It is also essential that staff have access to their unions who may be able to offer additional support and further services to members.

In some cases there may be malicious allegations (open and 'hidden/suggested') made about a member of staff that need to be investigated. The Headteacher will look at the school's safeguarding procedures to carry out a formal inquiry into the matter.

## 3. Meet with parents/guardians

In many cases the reason why a parent/guardian has made comments about the school or staff members on a social networking site has either been through ignorance about the implications (ie not knowing all the facts) of making such comments or that they are unaware of the school's complaints procedure. In the majority of incidents a

meeting with the parents can resolve the matter and the Headteacher can identify the particular grievance and ensure that a suitable solution is put into place. At this meeting it is important that printouts of the allegations or comments are passed to the Headteacher to verify what has been posted. At this stage, it is important that the Headteacher asks that any offending posts or pages are removed from the site.

Advice on how to remove a Facebook Page or Post can be found here:

<https://www.facebook.com/help/>

If the meeting does not have a successful outcome, it is important for the Headteacher to stress that the school will have to take further action to resolve the matter. Although it is essential not to cause any further problems, the professional status of staff and the school needs to be maintained and it cannot be compromised by ANY malicious comments or allegations. The school may want to warn parents that any existing comments or a continuation of posts could lead to legal action being taken.

#### 4. Further action

If the matter is not resolved at this meeting, then the school has a number of options to address the situation. While it does not want to escalate the matter, it is crucial that it tries to come to a sensible conclusion.

- a. Arrange a further meeting and invite the Chair of the Governing Board.

To ensure that parents understand the seriousness of the matter, a further meeting can be arranged with the Chair present to convey the damage that these comments are having on the school community. It is essential that the Chair is fully briefed before the

meeting and that a common approach is taken by the school to address the matter. Again, it gives an opportunity for the parents to share any grievances and for an action plan to be established to deal with any concerns expressed by them.

#### b. Report offending material

If the parents do not agree to remove any offending content or pages they have set up, then the school can report offending material to the site administrators. Usually this raises a 'ticket' with those who monitor content on the site and they assess this in relation to whether any of the terms and conditions have been violated.

The school has the details of how to report such material.

#### c. Take legal advice

The final step for school is to seek legal advice on comments posted on a social media site. This may result in a letter from a solicitor being sent out to parents warning them that malicious/racist allegations could result in legal action. If a staff member's name, or anything related to them personally, is posted within the content of any posts, then further action will be taken. Negative/damaging comments about the school, or any events related to the school or its staff, will similarly be dealt with. The final decision may be taken by the Headteacher to ask the parents to remove their pupils from the school in order to prevent further distress to staff/school community.

#### 5. Assure other parents

Allegations or malicious comments against members of staff or the school can have an unwanted effect on the school's ethos and lead to a whispering campaign in a community with a detrimental effect on

children and young people. It is crucial that school reassures that these types of issues are not to reoccur - a joint letter from the Headteacher and Chair of the Governing Board will be sent out to all parents explaining the importance of using social media appropriately and showing a 'positive digital profile' to children and young people.

### Conclusion:

In the age of social media, all institutions need to be robust against criticisms and opinions. Complaints by parents are nothing new for schools. The problem today is that these complaints can be all too easily shared in the public domain and a post of Facebook can reach thousands of users instantly, damaging reputations and giving a misleading slant to any issue. Schools cannot monitor every moment put on social networking sites, but they can be proactive in trying to ensure that parents and guardians have a responsibility to act as a 'positive digital role model' to their children.

(The DfE, NAHT, NASUWT, ATL & UNISON all have support materials for staff re social networking sites and allegations of abuse towards staff.)

