

Should teachers and students be Facebook friends?

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In this April 4, 2012 photo, Nkomo Morris, a teacher at Brooklyn's Art and Media High School, works on her classroom computer in New York. Morris, who teaches English and journalism, said she has about 50 current and former students as Facebook friends. That could be a problem if the new rules instruct teachers not to friend students. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

(AP) -- Should students and teachers ever be friends on Facebook? School districts across the country, including the nation's largest, are weighing that question as they seek to balance the risks of inappropriate contact with the academic benefits of social networking.

At least 40 [school districts](#) nationwide have approved social media policies. Schools in New York City and Florida have disciplined teachers for Facebook activity, and Missouri legislators recently acquiesced to teachers' objections to a strict statewide policy.

In the New York cases, one teacher friended several female [students](#) and wrote comments including "this is sexy" under their photos, investigators said. A substitute teacher sent a message to a student saying that her boyfriend did not "deserve a beautiful girl like you."

Such behavior clearly oversteps boundaries, but some teachers say social media - in particular Facebook - can be a vital educational resource if used appropriately, especially because it's a primary means of communication for today's youngsters.

"Email is becoming a dinosaur," said David Roush, who teaches media communications and television production at a Bronx [high school](#).

"Letters home are becoming a dinosaur. The old methods of engaging our students and our parents are starting to die."

New York Chancellor Dennis Walcott plans to release social media guidelines this month, saying recently that teachers "don't want to be put in a situation that could either compromise them or be misinterpreted."

Roush does not accept students as friends on his personal Facebook page but has created a separate profile to communicate with them - something that runs afoul of Facebook rules restricting users to a single profile. He used the page to get the word out quickly about a summer internship on a cable-access show, and a student who learned about it from the Facebook post won it.

"If I would have emailed him, if I had tried calling him, he never would have got it," Roush said.

Nkomo Morris, who teaches English and journalism at a high school in Brooklyn, said she has about 50 current and former students as Facebook friends. That could be a problem if the new rules instruct teachers not to friend students.

In that event, "I'd send out a massive message, and I would unfriend them," Morris said.

In the meantime, Morris manages her privacy settings so neither current nor former students see her personal information but do see posts about current events. She also lets students know whether something on their Facebook pages raises a red flag, such as sexual content.

"They're not always as savvy as I am," Morris said. "They haven't really grasped the level of formality out in the real world."

Efforts like New York's have been subject to legal wrangling and resistance from teachers and their advocates.

Missouri legislators last year passed a law that barred teachers from using websites that allow "exclusive access" with students 18 years old or younger. Teachers complained that they would be banned from Facebook and Twitter.

A judge granted an injunction, declaring that the law "would have a chilling effect" on free-speech rights. The legislature then repealed the restrictions and passed a new law directing school districts to develop their own policies.

Some districts adopted a model policy by the Missouri School Boards Association, decreeing that staff members must use district-approved devices when communicating electronically with students. The guidelines are intended to make it easier for supervisors to monitor teacher-student interactions.

The Missouri State Teachers Association believes some of the local policies are too restrictive. Spokesman Todd Fuller said the association will support its members if they are disciplined under those new rules.

"We're prepared to deal with the first issue where a teacher's rights are being infringed," he said.

In New York City, a United Federation of Teachers spokesman said the union would not comment without seeing the district's new guidelines.

Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, said she hopes the new policy considers First Amendment rights as well as "the enormous potential for benefiting students' education that is represented by technology."

Musical theater teacher Charles Willis was suspended in 2010 from Braden River High School in Florida for friending more than 100 students on Facebook and for allegedly posting sexually suggestive images and acronyms for profane words. He is now in a non-classroom job at another school, said John Bowen, a school board attorney.

Willis' lawyer did not return a call from The Associated Press. In comments to the Bradenton Herald in March, Willis noted that students aren't innocents.

"For anyone who says that a teacher shouldn't curse in front of students, I say they haven't been on a football field or in the dugout in a baseball game," he told the newspaper. "If you could go incognito in those settings and somehow gather audio, you might be surprised at what is said."

Doctoral research at the University of Southern California found 41 districts nationwide that have approved [social media](#) policies.

Under a policy approved by the school board in Muscogee County, Ga., in November, school employees are "strongly discouraged" from allowing students access to personal websites. Districts in Tampa, Fla.,

and Norton, Mass., also have wrestled with the issue.

Nancy Willard, author of "Cyber Savvy: Embracing Digital Safety and Civility," believes school districts should set up their own online environments and use tools like Gaggle.net and ePals.com, which have been designed for educational purposes. There is also Edmodo, a Facebook-like network for teachers and students.

The problem with Facebook, she said, is that it was set up for socializing.

"On Facebook, flirting is encouraged," she said. "You are encouraged to post your relationship status and your relationship interests. That's not appropriate for a relationship between [teachers](#) and students."

James Giordano, a guidance counselor at a Bronx high [school](#), said that he makes a habit of waiting about four years after a student has graduated to friend one and that he's glad the district is discussing the issue.

"I hope that they distinguish between personal Facebook pages and pages that are professional," he said. "It would be a shame if [Facebook](#) altogether was banned from use by educators, because it's a valuable resource."

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