



Dealing with complaints against schools by parents or carers on social networking sites

April 2013

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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, e.g. 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 a 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 body.

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 carers. 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 a school week, she found that there were only a handful of children in the school 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 carers who raise issues on social networking sites. However, schools can 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 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 carers 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 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 carer 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 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. 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 local trade unions who may be able to offer additional support and further services to members.

In some cases there may be malicious allegations made about a member of staff that need to be investigated, for example, a suggestion that a child or young person has been manhandled by a staff member, and the headteacher will have to look at the school's safeguarding procedures to carry out a formal inquiry into the matter.

3. Meet with parents or carers

In many cases the reason why a parent or carer has made comments about the school or staff members on a social networking site has either been through ignorance about the implications 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 the 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 governors

To ensure that the parents understand the seriousness of the matter, a further meeting can be arranged with the chair of governors present to convey the damage that these comments are having on the school community. It is essential that the chair of governors is fully briefed before the meeting and that a common approach is taken by the school to address this 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 has been violated. Schools have to be aware that there will be a time delay in the review of this content and that, if the content does not breach the terms and conditions, then the site administrators will not remove it.

Material can be reported through the following process

Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/help/181495968648557/>

Twitter - <https://support.twitter.com/groups/56-policies-violations/topics/238-report-a-violation/articles/15789-how-to-report-violations>

YouTube - <http://support.google.com/youtube/?hl=en-GB&topic=2676378#topic=2803138>

c. Take legal advice

The final step for a school may be to seek legal advice on comments posted on a social media site. In some cases this has resulted in a letter from a solicitor being sent out to the parents warning them that malicious allegations could result in legal action. It is important that the school considers the implications of such action, as involving a private firm of solicitors will result in legal fees. Currently, there is much discussion about UK law and social media and a headteacher may be advised to look at the following articles before taking legal action:

Twitter Users – A guide to the law <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20782257>

The Law Donut – Social media and UK law <http://www.lawdonut.co.uk/law/exit-strategies/test/your-it/social-media-and-the-law-a-checklist>

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 a school ensures that these types of issues do not reoccur and it is advised that a joint letter from the headteacher and chair of governors is sent out to all parents explaining the importance of using social media appropriately and showing a 'positive digital profile' to children and young people. The school may also wish to hold an eSafety session for parents addressing issues around the correct use of social media.

Dear Parent/Carer,

As you will be fully aware, the internet has become a powerful tool to connect and to share ideas and opinions. In recent years, social networking sites such as Facebook have grown in popularity and many people use them to communicate with family, friends and others.

The vast majority of people who use social networking show respect in their communication with others and this is something that we must encourage to show our children that we are positive 'digital role models'. However, like other aspects of society, there are people who disregard the rules set and will use social networking sites to cyberbully, harass or stalk others.

Recently, there have been a number of high-profile cases in the media where people have used the internet to intimidate and bully others. These have been investigated by the police and, in some instances, have led to criminal prosecutions.

As a school, we encourage parents to support us with the education and wellbeing of their children and if at any time, parents feel that they have any issues regarding their child's education, they should make an appointment with me. As a community, we should all frown upon the use of social networking sites by parents to criticise and make unsubstantiated comments about the school or any members of staff.

We do not want to go down the line of having to send out legal letters from solicitors to parents about untrue and damaging comments made on social networking sites. Current laws such as the 1988 Malicious Communication Act, 1997 Protection From Harassment Act and 2003 Communication Act all can be used to protect people from malicious and threatening posts on the internet.

In light of this, I have updated the current 'Home-School Agreement' to include a section about the complaints procedures in school and I would be grateful if you could read, sign it and return it to school.

Also, I am arranging a parent's session on eSafety to help us support our children in the online world and I would be grateful for as many to attend this as possible.

Thank you for your continued support.

Regards,

Headteacher

Chair of governors

6. Other Action

a. Home-School Agreement

Most schools have a contract between parents and the school to ensure that children and young people are fully supported with their learning and welfare both inside and out of the classroom. Many of the statements refer to parents reinforcing schools' policies on homework, behaviour and conduct. In order to counter any parent discussing sensitive issues about individual teachers or pupils on social networks, a number of schools have decided to include a statement on the Home-School Agreement to try and stop parents from making derogatory or malicious comments. While it is difficult to monitor all parents use of social networking sites, it does show that the school takes this matter seriously and, the fact that parents have signed the agreement, means that they have a responsibility to act appropriately. Some example statements are as follows

'Parents/carers are reminded to use existing structures when making any complaint about the school or a member of staff. They are advised not to discuss any matters on social networking sites'.

'If at any time during your child's time at xxxx school, you wish to make a complaint, then you are advised to follow the school's complaints procedure which can be found on the school website [insert link]. We recommend that all parents and carers refrain from using social networking sites to discuss sensitive issues about the school.'

b. Acceptable user policy (AUP)

All schools should have an AUP that is signed by staff and pupils to ensure that they use digital technology and the internet within school safely and understand the sanctions resulting from breaches of this policy. A number of schools include statements that refer to parental support on this matter and these also ask parents to monitor children and young people's use of digital technology and social media while they are out of school. The policy should be reviewed and, where necessary, updated on an annual basis; and schools could include a statement on parental use of social networking. A sample statement could be

'As a parent, I support school policies on ICT and I will ensure that I monitor my child's use of the internet (including social media) outside of school. I will act as a positive role model to my child, by ensuring that I use social media responsibly.'

c. Complaints policy

Whenever there is a dispute between a parent and a school, it is important that the complaints procedure is followed so that grievances are taken seriously and solutions can be quickly found to ensure that the child or young person's education is not disrupted. In many schools this policy can be a generic document, produced by a local authority or academy chain, which can be incorporated as part of the procedures that schools have in place. It is important that headteachers ensure that this document is 'fit for purpose' and that it covers issues around complaints made on social media sites. A summary of the policy could be included in the parent's handbook when the child or young person starts school. A sample paragraph could include

Complaints Policy

'We hope that your child's time at xxxx school is happy and productive. We are always keen to discuss matters with parents, to ensure that every child achieves his or her full potential. If, at any time, you have any concerns about your child at school, then please do not hesitate to contact the school and, if necessary, make an appointment to see relevant staff members to discuss any issue. It is important that parents and carers support the school in its constant drive to raise standards and we would much rather discuss any grievance with you than it being discussed in other forums. Therefore, we would recommend that any concerns or issues are not discussed on social media sites as this could be potentially damaging for the school and pupils.'

d. School Social Media Sites

Many schools have now decided to have a presence on social media through either Twitter or Facebook. This is useful, as information can be quickly communicated to parents and pupils whenever the school has to make a decision such as closing the site due to bad weather. However, it can also act as a way to counter any negative comments that appear on social media and parents can use it as a reliable source of information. It is essential that, when schools decide to set up social media sites, they look at procedures to post and moderate the information and policies. For example, if

pictures of pupils are uploaded to any site the photographic policy should be updated. A useful document to review a school's social media has been produced by Kent County Council:

Using social media and technology in educational settings

http://www.kenttrustweb.org.uk/UserFiles/CW/File/Childrens_Services/Childrens_Safeguards_Service/esafety/Using_Social_Media_and_Technology_in_Educational_Settings_October_2011.pdf

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 as, in the past, many have gone to local media outlets such as newspapers to highlight decisions or issues made by the school. The problem today is that these complaints can easily be shared in the public domain and a post on Facebook can reach thousands of users instantly, damaging reputations and giving a misleading slant to any issue. Schools cannot monitor every comment put on social networking sites, but they can be proactive in trying to ensure that parents and carers have a responsibility to act as a 'positive digital role model' to their children.

Useful Links

YHGfL eSafeguarding

<http://www.yhgfl.net/eSafeguarding>

Department for Education – Allegations of abuse against staff

<http://www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/advice/f0076882/ensuring-good-behaviour-in-schools/allegations-of-abuse-against-staff>

Cyberbullying - Supporting School Staff (DCSF)

http://www.digizen.org/downloads/cyberbullying_teachers.pdf

NAHT - Working with the Media

<http://www.naht.org.uk/EasysiteWeb/getresource.axd?AssetID=25712&type=full&servicetype=Attachment>

NASUWT - Social networking - Guidelines for Members

http://www.nasuwt.org.uk/InformationandAdvice/Professionalissues/SocialNetworking/NASUWT_007513

NUT - Internet safety

<http://www.teachers.org.uk/node/10627>

ATL – Your safety net

<http://www.atl.org.uk/Images/Your%20safety%20net.pdf>

UNISON – Responsible social networking

<http://www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/Social%20Networking%20Leaflet.pdf>