

FCC opens access to social media sites for e-Rate users

Posted By [NoraCarr](#) On September 26, 2011 @ 9:33 pm In [Policy,Stakeholder and Community Relations,Top News](#) | [No Comments](#)



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In August, the FCC clarified an earlier ruling that led to widespread blocking of social media networks by school districts receiving discounted internet access through federal e-Rate dollars.

Now that even the staid Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has loosened its tight rein on social media networks, it's time for more educators to use these tools to improve classroom instruction and home-school communications.

In August, the FCC clarified an earlier ruling that led to widespread blocking of social media networks by school districts receiving discounted internet access through federal e-Rate dollars.

According to the ruling, *"Although it is possible that certain individual Facebook or MySpace pages could potentially contain material harmful to minors, we do not find that these websites are per se 'harmful to minors' or fall into one of the categories that schools and libraries must block."*

By clarifying that schools can allow access to social media websites without violating the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) and risk losing coveted e-Rate dollars for telecommunications, the FCC opened access to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other top social media sites for instructional use.

Before teachers start tweeting, though, school officials need to update their acceptable use policies to allow appropriate use of social media networks at school. Although districts have until July 2012 to meet the new federal mandate, teacher-driven [social media gaffes](#) ^[2]—and firings—are on the rise.

Teachers aren't the only ones who need guidance on using social media networks wisely and well. The same FCC ruling that loosened its tight rein on social media access also holds eRate-funded schools to higher certification standards.

Schools now must show with more specificity how they're teaching students to behave appropriately online, whether that interaction occurs at home or at school. This includes cyber-bullying awareness, prevention, and intervention.

Allowing access to more social media networks, while still filtering out child pornography, obscene images, and "other material considered harmful to minors," represents both a new opportunity and a challenge for teachers, principals, school boards, and school IT professionals. (The FCC defines a minor as anyone under the age of 17.)

Anyone who has spent five minutes surfing around Facebook or MySpace knows that there is plenty of potentially obscene, pornographic, or harmful material available. Although acknowledging this possibility, the FCC ruling leaves the identification and definition of objectionable material to local authorities.

This means school boards need to adapt their current policies for students and staff to account for social media sites and other emerging technologies. This also means wise teachers and school leaders aren't going to jump into social media outreach and instruction without clear written guidelines to support them if—or, more likely, when—someone abuses the privilege of gaining greater online access at school.

For school IT professionals, who also have to contend with the growing ["bring your own technology"](#) ^[3] (BYOT) to school movement, protecting student and personnel privacy is getting tougher, especially as smart mobile devices threaten traditional firewalls with obsolescence.

With mobile device use becoming ubiquitous everywhere but school, it's only a matter of time before the hordes of tablet, smart phone, and eReader users overwhelm school boards with requests for full access in classrooms. Students, teachers, and principals working at night or on the weekends are going to want more access to school system databases, information, records, and academic content.

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) is encouraging 24-7 access for teachers and students through a variety of public policy initiatives, including Race to the Top. The vision, according to ED's website, is a "highly connected teacher, with ready access to not only the digital content, tools, and resources, but also to the experts and peers who can offer immediate assistance regardless of geographic proximity."

Keeping copyrighted and legally protected information private while providing maximum access via a host of devices and platforms is a tough challenge, especially for cash-strapped school systems that have seen their budgets slashed repeatedly since the Great Recession started in 2008.

Although the notion of controlled access is likely an oxymoron when it comes to social media and internet access, that seems to be what the FCC was aiming for in its latest ruling, which updates rules created before the emergence of social media sites.

The FCC still holds schools accountable for protecting students using classroom and media center computers and devices. Before unlocking access district-wide, school officials might want to consider a phase-in or permission-based approach once students, teachers, and even parents have completed face-to-face or online training modules in appropriate use.

School officials also will have to figure out who pays for content and access that defies geographic boundaries. Most elected officials and taxpayers are going to want some assurance that their hard-earned dollars are helping students in their local communities, while companies that have invested millions in developing digital content aren't going to give it away for free.

Despite these concerns, accessing digital content across multiple platforms, operating systems, and mobile devices is part of daily life for most American adults. It's time we stop asking students to check their technology at the door and open access in our classrooms, media centers, and schools as well

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Article printed from eSchool News: <http://www.eschoolnews.com>

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[2] social media gaffes: <http://www.eschoolnews.com/2011/08/25/for-educators-painful-lessons-in-social-media-use/>

[3] "bring your own technology": <http://www.eschoolnews.com/2011/04/29/bring-your-own-device-catching-on-in-schools/>