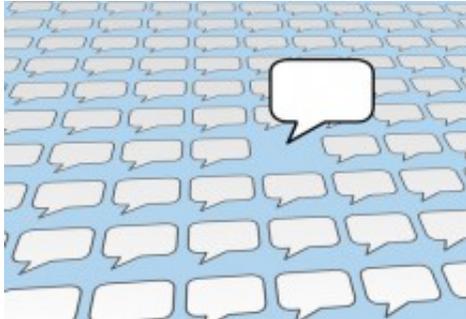


For educators, painful lessons in social media use

Posted By [staff and wire service reports](#) On August 25, 2011 @ 5:34 pm In [eClassroom News, McClatchy, Personnel, Policy, social networking, Top News](#) | [No Comments](#)



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"Social media, by its very nature, is a public venue. It is not private. It is similar to buying an ad in the daily newspaper," says eSN columnist Nora Carr.

The recent examples of two teachers who have come under fire for questionable social media posts should serve as a warning to other educators: Be careful what you post online.

In one case, a Pennsylvania high school is grappling with how to deal with requests from more than 200 students who don't want to be assigned to teacher Natalie Munroe's English classes, once Munroe returns to school Aug. 29 for the first time [since being suspended in February](#) [2] for posting blog comments that were critical of her students.

In the other case, Lake County, Fla., teacher Jerry Buell—who was suspended after making anti-gay comments on Facebook—returned to the classroom Aug. 26 after being reinstated by Lake County Schools Superintendent Susan Moxley.

Both instances highlight the need for educators to show proper judgment in using social media to communicate, said [Nora Carr](#) [3], an award-winning columnist for *eSchool News*.

See also:

[Ten tips for using social media in school communications](#) [4]

Educators "need to recognize that they serve as role models for children and young people," said Carr, who writes a monthly column on stakeholder relations for *eSchool News* and is the chief of staff for North Carolina's Guilford County Schools. "They also need to recognize that social media, by its very nature, is a public venue. It is not private. It is similar to buying an ad in the daily newspaper."

She added: "If you do this on your own time and using your own equipment, you have the right to say whatever you want to. That doesn't mean that there won't be professional consequences, however—particularly if what you post is hurtful or demeaning to a student."

Central Bucks High School East probably will use a substitute teacher to take over Munroe's three classes, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported Aug. 24.

Sixty-two of the estimated 90 students assigned to Munroe's two English classes and one debate class requested transfers, leaving her with about 28 students, school spokeswoman Carol Counihan said. More requests are expected before classes start Aug. 30, she said.

By using a substitute to teach the classes, rather than transferring the students, the district could honor students' requests to not be assigned to Munroe and follow its class-size policy, Counihan said.

Munroe was suspended for blog posts describing some students as "frightfully dim," "whiny," and "utterly loathsome." She did not identify students, the school, or the district, but she did post her photo.

The district has ruled out transferring Munroe, preferring to "contain the issue" at the school where she has taught for four years.

Munroe, who went on maternity leave two weeks after her suspension, could not be reached for comment. "I will teach in an empty classroom if I have to," she said earlier this month.

In Lake County, Fla., teacher Jerry Buell met with Superintendent Moxley for about an hour on Aug. 24 before her decision to reinstate him was announced, reports the *Orlando Sentinel*. A "written directive" was placed in his file, said school district spokesman Chris Patton.

The school district started investigating Buell last week after receiving copies of a Facebook post in which the teacher said he "almost threw up" when hearing news about New York's legalization of gay marriage. He compared gay unions to a "cesspool" and said they were a "sin."

See also:

[Ten tips for using social media in school communications](#) ^[5]

The case has drawn national attention, with both the American Civil Liberties Union and the ultra-conservative Liberty Counsel backing Buell's right to speak his mind. The Liberty Counsel represented Buell throughout the investigation and at his Aug. 24 meeting with Moxley.

"Today is a great day for the Constitution and for the First Amendment," said Buell's attorney, Harry Mihet, of the Liberty Council. "His views were the views of ... a majority of Floridians."

The school district's investigation centered on whether he violated an ethics policy calling for educators to value the "worth and dignity of every person." Patton said Aug. 24 that the school district will continue to enforce its ethics policy.

Buell is a 26-year teacher and social studies department chair at Mount Dora High School. He was heavily involved with the school's Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and some former students questioned whether he completely left his beliefs at the school door.

On his class syllabus, he offers this warning to students: "I teach God's truth, I make very few compromises. If you believe you may have a problem with that, get your schedule changed, 'cause I ain't changing!" On a separate document, he also said the classroom was his "mission field."

Some believed his unchanging views and anti-gay comments would be harmful to gay students.

"It really is scary," said Tyler Morris, 26, a former student who learned of Buell's reinstatement. "To allow someone who has repeatedly made the same offense of making students uncomfortable and fearful should not be tolerated."

But Buell on Aug. 24 said that gay students do not need to worry about being treated differently when they walk into his classroom. As far as continuing to post comments on Facebook, that's not likely to happen, either: Buell said he has closed the social media website account at his wife's urging.

For school district officials, the boundaries for what constitutes acceptable free speech on social media platforms outside of school are still murky.

From a legal perspective, "we're in largely uncharted waters, so I understand why attorneys that represent school boards and school districts are hesitant to take these courses to court," Carr said. "That said, I believe school districts need to take a stand to preserve the integrity of the teaching profession and the educational process at school."

The standards for professionalism are higher for teachers and other public employees, Carr said—"as they should be." She added: "Last I checked, the First Amendment doesn't protect you from the consequences that flow from unethical and unprofessional behavior that is potentially damaging to children or disruptive to the educational process."

As educators, Carr noted, "we need to represent our profession, our students, our schools, and our school districts well. Insulting parents and their children, and the choices they make, has no place in public schools."

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[2] since being suspended in February: <http://www.eschoolnews.com/2011/08/04/teacher-suspended-for-cruel-blog-posts-gets-ready-to-return/>

[3] Nora Carr: <http://www.eschoolnews.com/author/noracarr/>

[4] Ten tips for using social media in school communications:
<http://www.eschoolnews.com/2011/06/15/ten-tips-for-using-social-media-in-school-communications/>

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