Module 2: Digital Communication Plan (McCay)

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**Introduction**

**Pueblo City Schools does many things well for students and parents, but in the realm of digital communication, the district needs to improve as quickly as possible. While the district has adopted multiple digital platforms of communication to keep stakeholders informed, administrators have not revised their communication policy since 1997, and as a result, are providing no written protection or instruction to teachers regarding social media use with the community.**

**The district needs to revise its parent, community, and media communication policy for the 21st century and offer training to all teachers on responsible use of social media with students and parents. Making these changes will protect all stakeholders more effectively, ensuring both clear communication and positive relationship development result from using these platforms. We need to communicate clearly with all stakeholders, and using social media as a communication platform is necessary in the digital age; however, we must also communicate responsibly for the safety of all people involved. South High School also needs to develop a campus policy for our specific stakeholders, addressing the specific forms of social media we allow: Facebook, Twitter, and (for coaches only) Instagram.**

**Ensuring Student, Staff, and District Safety**

Ensuring the safety of all stakeholders, especially students and staff members, is essential when changing digital communication policies. The most important change South High School needs to make to ensure safety is to develop a written digital use policy, which our campus does not have. Our district does not technically have one, either. In 1997 the school board released a policy revision, and digital communication with parents is only referenced briefly: “The special relationship between the school and interested parents who belong to supportive organizations such as parent-teacher associations or booster clubs shall be encouraged" (Ward, 1997). Teachers new to the district attend a week-long training at the end of each summer, and they receive verbal expectations about social media use, parent communication, and proper professionalism with students, but no written documents regarding social media and its proper use are provided.

The out-of-date policy needs revision if our district wants to truly protect all stakeholders. This policy was written prior to the launch of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, all of which are used by our district as well as our individual buildings as relevant communication assets. The only advice building administrators receive about such communication also comes from the 1990s revision to district policy: “Building administrators shall be allowed to make public statements regarding their individual buildings however such administrators are advised and encouraged to make use of the services and assistance of the communications coordinator" (Ward, *sic*, 1997). The district no longer has a “communications coordinator” of any kind, only a media relations department, so once again, this policy is not even accurate, much less protective for the 21st century.

**Ongoing Professional Development in Digital Communication with Students and Parents**

To ensure teachers know current best practices regarding digital communication, South needs to make another change to support its revised written policy. Ongoing professional development in 21st century communication for all staff members should be the very next step for the future. A series of individualized digital modules as well as small video segments in larger trainings to remind instructors of the importance of effective and safe communication will help all teachers improve their practices, regardless of their years away from formal education.

Differentiated tracks for professional development are vital as South revises its policy and implementation because the staff at South are diverse. We have three teachers, who are first-year instructors, and they are well-versed in digital communication—including the legal concerns raised through digital communication—because their recent certification programs offered courses in this specific issue. We also have five teachers, who have been in the classroom for 39 or more years (46 for the oldest); their degrees provided no training in 21st century communication with students and parents . . . these forms of communication didn’t exist when they earned their degrees. When digital publication and product creation are “an essential step” in the learning and self-evaluation process for students, they need to be essential for instructors, as well (Crockett, Jukes, & Churches, 2011, p. 101).

To support a new written policy, South will therefore need a truly individualized professional development program, which trains teachers from their current knowledge level to a mastery level of digital use. South High School uses Google Classroom for differentiated professional development in the personal learning environment, and utilizing this existing format will allow all teachers to grow their digital communication proficiency more effectively than a one-track model of training, which violates the spirit of modern education. An outstanding format, which allows teachers to share their learning with one another, “is through short videos posted on YouTube, SchoolTube, Teachertube, or an equivalent” (Prensky, 2010, p. 186). Using short video segments from proficient teachers as part of the digital trainings would help teachers grow quickly in their skills.

**Professional Development for Positive and Negative Consequences of Digital Communication**

An essential component of professional development for the instructors of South High School needs to address both the positive and the negative consequences of using digital communication with students and parents. Most students and parents use social networking tools for their private lives, and both groups can benefit from learning to access social media platforms professionally (Sprenger, 2010, p. 57). While digital communication is expedient and therefore effective in the 21st century, teachers must also be aware that using social media for parent communication about their children’s specific academic success is unwise: “Social networking is a dicey tool that while allowing teacher to increase the level of communication using a recognizable social media format, possesses inherently a high risk” (Ramasubba, 2015). Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, the two primary platforms used by South High School, own any information posted on their sites, and providing student information on these sites could violate FERPA laws quickly. Even posting specific student names with pictures—without the prior permission of parents—can result in a lawsuit for violation of privacy.

South High School already has a verbal policy that teachers will NEVER accept or send friend requests from students, that the posting of student pictures must be approved prior to posting, and that all social media communication with students should also include one principal for oversight. These practices have grown out of traditional professionalism for teachers, who should always establish a “firm calm finesse” with students to improve classroom management and to protect the safety of the learning environment, which in the 21st century includes the digital landscape (Lemov, *sic*, 2015, pp. 403-406). Our campus does not have any requirements for communicating with or befriending parents via these platforms. Along with a clear written policy, South needs to train teachers about the benefits of communicating academic information via email or direct conferences rather than any social media platform and only using social media to communicate general information in a positive light, providing parents with more chances to learn campus information than more traditional phone calls, notes home, and/or websites.

**Conclusion**

21st century communication offers more benefits than concerns when administrators’ teaching staff is trained in its proper use. The speed alone makes the use of social media an effective platform in the digital age. However, administrators must provide written policies addressing their district and campus policies for proper use with students and parents to ensure all stakeholders are protected while they use new platforms for communication. And as they provide policies, they must also provide meaningful, differentiated professional development to support their teachers as they use modern platforms to keep parents professionally informed about their students’ activities in school. Providing a clear policy and supportive learning opportunities will ensure that the use of social media for communication becomes a strength rather than a concern for administrators’ individual buildings.

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