



NORTHPORT - EAST NORTHPORT UNION FREE SCHOOL DISTRICT

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT FOR INSTRUCTION AND ADMINISTRATION

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Dear Parents and Guardians,

The **Northport-East Northport Union Free School District** and the **Northport-East Northport Council of PTAs** have decided to reach out to all members of our educational community to cooperatively address the very important issue of **"Internet Social Networking."**

Most of you are aware of the popularity of social networking sites that are accessed by our students via the Internet; examples would include *Facebook* and *MySpace*. These sites allow students to register and add content such as personal profiles, messages, images or videos that are accessible by their friends, family and fellow students. As this is an Internet service, students can communicate and share their thoughts with friends and family all over the world. These sites extend students' social groups, and they have partially replaced or at least extended the traditional face-to-face social interactions that defined previous generations.

Internet social networking is relatively unregulated and, although *Facebook* stipulates a minimum age of 13 before joining the service, we have found many of our middle school students are currently using the site. If your children are currently using a social networking service, they need to be aware of the implications and adhere to a good code of practice to keep them safe.

We have found that many students feel safe in the security of their homes, and they often give away far too much personal information. Some of this information could find its way into the hands of the thousands of pedophiles trawling the Internet. Some of our students may also publish photographs or videos of themselves and their friends which some would consider inappropriate or even offensive. Students need to fully understand that the Internet is in the public domain, and that they are publishing their personal information and opinions for the world to see.

It is also important for students to understand that using social networks to make derogatory comments about other students or teachers is hurtful, bullying behavior that effects the school environment and culture and will be met with severe consequences by school administrators. It goes without saying that their friends are not the only people using these sites, and it is well known that university and college admissions officers as well as potential employers will browse these sites to gather information on students who have applied for college admission or employment.

These sites are blocked by our web filter while students are in school, but they are freely accessible while a student is at home or using a friend's Internet connection. Our goal is not to dissuade students from appropriately using these services to interact with friends and family. In fact, the

District continues to move forward in an effort to provide students with safe, secure on-line opportunities for collaboration and learning. We simply wish to ensure that students' understand the importance of responsible, cautious use of social networking sites and how these sites extend well beyond the borders of their homes, schools, and community.

We urge you to ask your child if he or she is using any of the social networking sites and to discuss the ways they are using them. We appreciate that this can be a sensitive issue as many teenagers feel that adults are already too intrusive. However, a discussion in which you and your child develop a mutually agreed upon code of practice may prevent what could be significant problems in the years to come. Please note that these issues are being discussed with your child in school, but nothing can replace a heart-felt discussion with a parent who values his or her child's safety above all else.

As a jumping-off point, here are some common social networking guidelines:

- **Keep the computer in an open area.** Ideally, a spot like the kitchen or family room works well, so you can keep an eye on where your children are online and what they're doing.
- **Use the Internet with your children.** Be open to learning about the technology, and consider developing a social networking "family" site together.
- **Talk to your children about their online habits.** If they use social networking sites, tell them why it's important to keep information like their name, address, phone number, and family financial information — like bank or credit card account numbers — to themselves. Remind them that they should not share information about other people in the family or about their friends. Your children should also be cautious about sharing the name of their school, sports teams, clubs, where they work or hang out, or any other information that could be used to identify them or locate them offline.
- **Make sure your child's screen name does not say too much about them.** Explain why it's inappropriate — even dangerous — to use one's full name, age, or hometown in a screen name. Even if your child thinks his or her screen name makes him or her anonymous, random clues can be combined to figure out who your child is and where he or she can be found.
- **Use privacy settings to restrict who can access and post to your child's website.** You may want to limit access to family and friends from school, clubs, teams, and community groups and exclude "public" access which includes strangers from neighboring schools and towns.
- **Your children should post only information that you — and they — are comfortable with others seeing and knowing.** As stated above, many people can see their page, including their teachers, the police, a college admissions officer, or a potential employer
- **Remind your children that once they post information online, they can't take it back.** Even if they delete the information from a site, older versions exist on other sites (like *The Wayback Machine* -- <http://www.archive.org/web/web.php>) and on other computers.
- **Warn your children about the dangers of "flirting" and socializing with people they do not know online.** As a general rule of thumb, children should not socialize on-line with anyone their parents do not know and socialize with in the real world. Some people lie about who they really are online, and if you have not physically met, you can never really know who you and/or your child are dealing with online.

- **Tell your children to trust their instincts if they have suspicions.** If they feel threatened by someone or uncomfortable because of something said online, they need to tell you immediately. You should then report the incident to the police and the social networking site. This will help to protect your child and may end up preventing someone else from becoming a victim.
- **Check site privacy policies.** Some sites may share information like your child's email address with other companies, which could generate spam and even spyware on the family computer. Sites' privacy policies or other posted links for parents also may contain contact information for you to ask about your child's personal information.

We would also recommend the following web sites for more information on Internet safety and social networking:

- I-safe: Virtual Training Academy: <http://vta.isafe.org/>
- FBI Guide to Internet Safety: <http://www.fbi.gov/publications/pguide/pguidee.htm>
- NetSmartz for Parents: <http://www.netsmartz.org/netparents.htm>
- NetSmartz Teen Safety: <http://www.netsmartz.org/safety/statistics.htm#teensafety>
- Disney Internet Safety: <http://home.disney.go.com/guestservices/safety>

We hope that the information and advice we have provided will be of help to you when discussing Internet social networking with your children. We look forward to continuing to move forward together, providing the right balance between allowing access to the tools that will help the children of Northport-East Northport learn and grow and keeping our children safe.

Sincerely,



Matthew E. Nelson
Assistant Superintendent for
Instruction and Administration



Susan Ronde
Parent and PTA Council Representative