

Lessons Learned: Tips For Drafting an Acceptable Use Policy

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Telecommunications, Internet and World Wide Web are only three of the current hypermedia buzzwords we are hearing daily. Each day, the number of users of the "Information Superhighway" increases at a staggering rate, and if educators are truly the lifelong learners we profess to be, school systems and their teachers are compelled to merge with the traffic.

The rapid change we are witnessing in technology is both exhilarating and ominous. The World Wide Web had literally arrived before society was prepared to meet it, and school divisions across the country have been or are currently developing policies for students' use of Internet's vast capabilities, many in retrospect.

As schools acquire increasing quantities of computer hardware and software, schools must justify their instructional use of this equipment. Teachers must learn to view the computer as a valid instructional tool, not just as a record keeper for classroom administration. With the emergence of telecommunications via the World Wide Web, an obvious dilemma surfaces: Given the "bad press" the Internet has received in the media, how do we prevent students from accessing inappropriate materials while allowing access to the immeasurable wealth of information? And who determines the definition of "inappropriate"?

Clearly, educators have a limited degree of control over the content that their students will be able to access at individual workstations; hence, the need for the Acceptable Use Policy arises. Such a document is designed to provide parents with an opportunity to grant their child Internet access privileges and/or waiver for publication on the WWW. Stafford County Public Schools debuted on the WWW in January 1996, and it became necessary to implement a formal policy. A team of educators and parents undertook the task of drafting an AUP for the division. In this process, we quickly identified two major and distinct foci: 1) Web publication guidelines; and 2) a policy for acceptable use of Internet by students.

One of the most frustrating yet crucial discoveries we made was that these two issues are inherently intertwined but must often be considered separately to arrive at language that treats each issue fairly. We found that we had to make a conscious effort to question whether each point raised was truly germane to Web publication or to student usage.

Selecting the Committee

One vital yet often overlooked aspect of collecting together a group to work on such a

document is the decision about who should serve. While it would have been quite easy to collect the 'WebMasters' from around the school district, it was felt that a topic as sensitive as this required a mix. The first order of business was to see that all segments of the county's hierarchy were represented - principals, teachers, central office administration, paraprofessionals, and parents. Each of these groups had interests in the outcome of the committee's work, at times similar interests, at other times the perspective was quite different. The next, and more difficult, task was to see to it that members on the committee came with varying degrees of knowledge about the Internet and the Web. This often led to frustrating discussions but it allowed the committee to view the finished product much the same way as the general public would view it.

Web Publication Guidelines

To our surprise, we discovered that dealing with the Web publication guidelines issue was far more complex than the other. However unintentional, discussion on such guidelines can become personal when a number of committee members are also the local schools' "WebMaster", and these people tend to be very passionate about preserving freedom of expression within such an evolving medium. Some of the specific points that we felt were necessary to explore included the following:

- Who will bear the primary responsibility for maintaining a Web page?
- Who will make the final judgment regarding the content of all pages and their subsequent updates?
- Will links outside the school system's "intranet" be included? If so, of what nature?
- Will Web pages be used to highlight student achievement? If so, will students' names be included?
- What is the process for updating information to each page?

There was little or no disagreement among our group that one person in a building should be designated as the main point of contact, through whom all updates to the page should flow. Additionally, this person would report regularly to his/her building administrator for pre-approval of any potential updates to the page(s).

The question of whether links to pages outside our web should be included was discussed at length. Someone raised the point that it could be risky to provide links to pages over which we had no editorial control. The counterargument acknowledged that as a valid concern but maintained that the use of multiple links is the nature of the medium and the very essence of what Internet is supposed to be--a free exchange of information facilitated by the ease of a button click. Our county's legal representative was instrumental in informing us that our legal liability for links ends at the face value of a page--that is, a link from School "A's" page to a site such as "Cougars" extends only to the content of the "Cougars" page, not to the potential links provided

therein. The task of checking links beyond that point would become time-prohibitive since Web links are literally exponential in nature. We weighed the risk factor again, acknowledging that the potential exists for students to stray into information not condoned by the school system, but we felt that the benefits outweighed the risk. To eliminate links would neutralize the effectiveness of the medium, and then--why bother at all?

However, we all agreed that links for links' sake are frowned upon. We determined that links contained on school pages must be appropriate and relevant to the curriculum and purposes of the school, including pages that are historical in nature, pages that provide educational services and/or resources, and pages that provide information on co-curricular activities.

We devoted considerable discussion to the issue of publishing students' names and/or photographs on the Web. We determined that with informed written consent on the part of the parent, publication of students' names or photographs would be permitted. It is important here to be able to separate the medium from the issues. While no one on the committee would argue that publication of student pictures or names in the local newspaper was risky, there were a number who held that publication on the Internet posed great hazards. It was determined that when viewed as simply another means of publicizing information, without regard to all the negative publicity the Web has received, photographs and names could--indeed, should-- be included. The provision that a waiver be signed was in recognition of the fact that many in the community would still harbor fears over this type of exposure. It is significant to note that the State Code of Virginia provides for the publication of certain types of "directory information", including name, address, phone, photograph, etc. without such a waiver being signed by the parent. The committee felt that Web publishing was a natural extension of this type of information publication.

Policy for Students' Acceptable Use of Internet

As previously mentioned, a critical point to make is that with any document aimed at parental permission, the school system must assure that the parent has provided informed consent. Although Internet is spreading in epidemic proportions, some parents have little information about what Internet really is. An acceptable use policy needs to speak to the general issues as they apply to the student but should not necessarily explain everything--it would truly be an impossible task. While not directly addressed by our committee, the issue of informing the general public will be addressed concurrently with providing Internet and WWW access.

The tendency is to develop a "dos and don'ts" list, which is probably a logical way to proceed. Resist the temptation to be extremely specific; such a list needs to be simple yet all-encompassing. We boiled our "dos and don'ts" down to a simple list of "a responsible user may" and "may not" statements, targeting the very straightforward language here for its primary audience--the students themselves.

And what if a student violates the rules by which he or she agrees to abide? As with any

other incident, the result of deliberate disregard for the rules should result in specific consequences, e.g., loss of Internet privileges for some period of time. Make the punishment fit the crime, but let us concentrate more on what we can accomplish with the majority of students who use this unique medium responsibly rather than dreaming up consequences for the small percentage who choose to undermine authority no matter the firewalls.

Resources

If you're serious about drafting documents regarding Internet usage and Web publication, then be prepared to do your homework! Contact colleagues in other school divisions, put out messages on Usenet newsgroups such as k12.ed.tech and k12.ed.comp.literacy, and surf the Net aggressively for policies already implemented in other school districts. Here are a few sites to get you started:

--GNN Education Center/Critiquing Acceptable Use Policies at

<http://www.gnn.com/gnn/meta/edu/features/archive/aup.html>

--Classroom Connect

<http://www.wentworth.com/classroom/aup.htm>

--Bellingham Public Schools

<http://www.bham.wednet.edu/policies.htm>

--K-12 Acceptable Use Policies

<http://www.erehwon.com/k12aup/>

and...although this is officially still a draft document awaiting approval, feel free to browse Stafford County Schools' AUP and Web guidelines at

<http://pen.k12.va.us/Anthology/Div/Stafford/tech/tech.html>

The Internet is to the 1990s what the telephone was to the 1870s--it's drastically different from what we've known in the past and thus a little scary, but the possibilities are endless. In the race for learning about the Internet and using it to help our students, teachers--the people who most directly shape the next generation--need to be on the inside lane!