

You and your Facebook:

Take precautions—your job may be at stake

Connect with old friends! Share photos! Keep in touch! Kind of like a 21st century global water cooler, right? But Facebook and other social networking websites can be a real hazard for educators, whose positions as quasi-public figures put them in a position unlike any others in their community.

It's not hard to imagine how things can get a little tricky for young, early-career educators. Revered by the third graders, labeled cool (or not) by seventh graders, and not far from being a peer to twelfth graders, new educators put their reputations with both students and the community at risk when their private lives are exposed through social networking sites like Facebook.

Many new educators find their high-visibility roles in the community a challenging adjustment. At a SPARKS event in Frederick County, educators shared their stories and concerns about being a searchable, easily accessible presence online with MSEA attorney Saurabh Gupta.

"Friends of mine have needed to delete photos because of 'inappropriate' actions like drinking or their clothing choices," said Jonathan Araujo. "Some were meant to be silly, like Halloween costumes, but others were things that the teachers just didn't realize were a problem."

"Use social networking sites with great care. I recommend educators put their content through 'the mom filter.' If your mom won't like it, neither will parents, administrators, or the community," Gupta cautioned. "A good way to check what other people are seeing on your Facebook is by using a friend's account to view your page, then making the necessary adjustments to your privacy settings."

Member-to-Member Tips for Using Facebook

Twenty-something educators from Frederick County helped create this list of don't-miss tips.

- Make sure only your friends can view your posts and profile. To change your privacy settings, click the dropdown arrow in the corner, select Settings, then select Privacy. Then adjust the options.
- Remove yourself from search listings. Facebook profiles now show up in search listings, but you can limit who can find you through searches. Under Privacy Settings, turn off the feature that allows search engines to link to your timeline.
- Sometimes, even your friends may tag you in a post that you won't want parents to see. So be sure to turn on Timeline Review so that you can review all posts that you have been tagged in. To do this, select Settings from the dropdown arrow, then choose Timeline and Tagging to edit your timeline settings. Be sure to "untag" yourself from any posts that you do not want others to see.
- Choose an obscure username that students won't think of, recognize, or search on Google.
- Don't accept friend requests from current or potential students or their family members. Be careful about accepting requests from former students.
- Before posting something, ask yourself, "Would I want my [principal, students, parents] to see this?"
- Be careful about linking your Facebook with other social networking sites. If you update your status on a linked Twitter account, it will publish to Facebook where others might see it.
- Monitor what is being published about you. If you're concerned that old friends or contacts could include you in online postings without your knowledge, try setting up a Google alert with your name, just to be safe. A Google alert will send you an email anytime your name is published online.