Electronic & Online Communication Policy

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1.   Introduction

At Balance International School we acknowledge that within the community, electronic communication is inevitable in today's society. As such we recognise that this can be an efficient and effective way of communicating with stakeholders. In turn, electronic communication can be used to strengthen the partnership between stakeholders to encourage better understanding of the school for the benefit of students and their well-being.

Whilst we acknowledge that electronic communication can be efficient, effective and useful, it does have its challenges, limitations and ramifications. As such, this policy, together with the supporting electronic communication procedures, aims to clarify expectations for staff and stakeholders in the use of electronic communication as a tool in line with our school core values and Choose Respect Charter.

2.   Principles and/or Objectives

This policy refers to all forms of electronic communication that include (but is not limited to): e-mail, SchoolBright Parent Portal, Line, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Wikipedia, SMS, Instagram, blogs etc.

- Staff are expected to maintain professional boundaries in all forms of communication, technology-related or otherwise, as this is vital to ensure trust between stakeholders and the school.
- The reputation of school can be influenced by employees and can be undermined by behaviour occurring in professional life and within staff's private life, including online activity. Therefore, staff are expected to exercise sound judgement and due care at all times.
- Staff are expected to be aware that electronic communication is not anonymous and can be tracked and visible on the Internet indefinitely. It can also be used as evidence in disciplinary or grievance procedures as well as in courts of law.
- It is expected that staff refrain from befriending students or parents in an online environment in any capacity other than that related to school matters and in a professional manner.
- Electronic communication channels are deemed inappropriate for the detailed discussion of student's academic, social, emotional or behavioural issues. These are best addressed telephonically or during parent-teacher conferences.
- Balance staff are expected to respect student privacy and confidentiality at all times when using electronic communication. No images or photos of students should be shared on the internet or through other public electronic communication channels.
- Electronic communication is not to be used for urgent matters as these require more immediate verbal or face-to-face contact.
- Electronic communication should always be courteous and respectful, in line with Balance's core values.
- In order to safeguard children, it is the duty of every staff member to report to their line manager any inappropriate electronic communication that is an infringement of Balance policy and procedures.
- Staff should be aware that non-compliance with Balance policy and supporting procedures could result in disciplinary action being taken against them

3.   Procedures

a)   Expectations of Staff for Electronic Communication

i.   Mass Circulars – Hardcopy or Electronic

A member of the leadership team must proofread any correspondence that goes out to parents/public/year groups etc. beforehand. Please allow the following notice for letters to be processed: at least three (3) working days before. Public circulars will be circulated via the respective school office. Please note that the SchoolBright Parent Portal is the main tool for communicating with parents, this includes, notices, reminders, homework details, letters, newsletters etc.

i.   How to Minimise Your Risk with Electronic Communication

•   Decline friend requests from students. Do not initiate any friend requests.

•   Keep up-to-date with social media and online developments to protect yourself from misuse.

•   Staff should not exchange private texts, personal telephone numbers, personal e-mail addresses or photos of a personal nature with parents and pupils.

•   If you happen to be a parent and a member of staff, use your own discretion as to whether you will accept a friend request from a parent or not, although this is not advisable. However, do not put yourself in an awkward position by being linked or involved in chat groups or forums that raise/question/criticise school related matters.

•   Operate online in a way which does not call into question your position as a professional. It is natural that students and parents will search for you online to find out more about you.

•   As a digital citizen, model the behaviour you would expect your students to use online.

•   Manage your privacy settings regularly to prevent anyone tagging you to inappropriate content or photographs etc.

•   Be aware that whatever you post online is public, not private. Anything written online can be re-sent and distributed to large numbers of people. It can be used as evidence in disciplinary or grievance procedures as well as in courts of law.

•   Before you post, consider these questions:

   o   Will it reflect poorly on you, Balance school or the teaching profession?
   o   Are you posting the material for personal or professional reasons?
   o   If posting a photograph, video or audio recording, will it be susceptible to misrepresentation, or manipulation? Will it be acceptable to students, parents, your family, school etc?
   o   Are you confident that your post when viewed will be considered reasonable and appropriate?

•   Respect pupil confidentiality and privacy at all times.

•   Always maintain a formal, courteous and professional tone (word choices, be ethical, grammar, integrity, standards & excellence) in writing.

•   Only use official channels to communicate to those in the community e.g., SchoolBright Parent Portal, school e-mail.

•   Please note that any opinions written using official school channels could be interpreted as those of the school, therefore, do not express personal views.

- The unauthorised release of personal or commercially sensitive data could result in disciplinary or legal action.
- Do not discuss pupils, colleagues, parents or carers online or criticise your employer or others in the community.
- Avoid heated, impulsive and inappropriate comments. Seek advice from Heads of School.
- It is your duty to raise any concerns you have with your Head of School if you find yourself in an uncomfortable position e.g., cyber bullying, comments, photographs, posts about you.
- It is your duty to report to your Head of School any inappropriate electronic communication concerning a pupil.

ii.   Electronic Communication Etiquette
- Check e-mail, SCHOOLBRIGHT Portal at least twice a day between the times of 07:30hrs and 16:30hrs on workdays. Check periodically during school holidays.
- Always respond within one (1) working day with at least an acknowledgement of receipt and indicate when an informed response will be sent (written, via telephone or in person).
- All written communication is representative of the school. Refrain from providing personal opinions.
- As written communication lacks intonation, the receiver can often misconstrue the tone or intent of the content.
- Electronic communication is unreliable in that most recipients tend to scan content instead of reading the detail.
- Wording used must have an emphasis on being polite, using conditional verbs e.g., can/could, will/would, may/might etc. Always thank the sender for their communication and be respectful.
- Focus on understanding the issue/problem and finding a solution.
- Avoid negative, confrontational, defensive, accusatory or sarcastic reactions in writing. It should not be an avenue to vent. Anything written should be professional and could be said directly in person. Seek the advice of a colleague or line manager if needed, including asking them to proofread the written draft.
- When writing, use passive voice avoiding personal pronouns (e.g., I, you) where possible. When using 'we', this must be in representation of the school. Some examples: It was… Students have… Students were… The school… The work has…etc.
- Keep communication brief, informative and precise. Issues that need more detailed discussion should be tackled via telephone or through a face-to-face meeting.
- Never use written communication to discuss or share sensitive issues that have not been either initiated by the parent or discussed with the parent beforehand.
- Never disclose other parents' contact details e.g., in e-mail through carbon copying, group e-mails.
- Never write about or share personal or sensitive content with a third party e.g., another parent not involved without the permission of the sender, of another colleague without their permission.

- Staff are not expected to respond in writing to contentious communication. These should be addressed through discussion on the telephone or through a face-to-face meeting.
- Staff are not expected to respond to abusive communication. Such cases should be referred immediately to the respective Head of School.
- Always set up an autoreply for times where you are not in the office.

iii. Examples of Behaviours that Warrant Disciplinary Measures
- Inappropriate electronic communication with pupils, colleagues, parents/guardians, including SMS.
- Posting/sending sexually explicit pictures or images to colleagues, pupils, parents/guardians.
- Posting/sending pictures or images to colleagues, pupils, parents/guardians of children that are not your own.
- Grooming – using electronic messages with the view to establish an inappropriate relationship with a pupil
- Possessing, making, viewing, distributing indecent images of children.
- Possessing images of students without parental permission on personal devices.
- Using inappropriate online content in an educational setting.

b) Expectations for Parents for Electronic Communication
- Please use electronic communication for non-urgent matters as teachers may not view the messages on time.
- Always keep communication courteous as staff are humans with feelings too. We will do our best to assist you with any matters that you raise. Please avoid writing impulsive and inappropriate comments in the heat of the moment.
- Remember to respect staff's personal time. Please do not send electronic communication outside of work hours and expect an immediate response. Staff are only expected to check and respond to electronic communication between 07:30hrs and 16:00hrs (academic staff) 16:30hrs (administration staff) on working days, not weekends, public or school holidays.
- Please note that academic staff prioritise their time with their classes during working hours and may not be able to respond to electronic communication until after school ends. Do expect a response or at least an acknowledgement within one (1) working day.
- Electronic communication should not be used to discuss in detail academic progress, learning expectations or behaviour issues. These should be done in person or on the telephone.
- Please do not make friend requests to staff on social media platforms.
- Please do not share images of children who are not your own on the Internet.
- Please do not ask staff for their personal contact details. Any communication with staff should be through official channels.

Reviewed on 1st August 2024