School Policy

Dealing With Complaints against Schools and Settings by Parents or Carers on Social Networking Sites

Introduction

The increasing number of people using social networking sites has had both a positive and adverse effect on the reputation of schools in local communities. Many schools have used social media as an effective tool for parental engagement, e.g. to forward information through Facebook and Twitter, and all parents are now encouraged to comment regularly through Parent View. However, in some cases, parents have bypassed the school's complaints procedures and taken to social networking sites to criticise and, in some cases, make malicious comments about individual members of staff or the community or regarding decisions that have been taken by the Headteacher.

In many ways the use of social networking sites to express these opinions is an extension of how people can already express their views on the internet. People use sites such as 'Trip Advisor' to review holiday accommodation and are encouraged to give online assessments of particular products they have purchased. However, remarks made about a school, member of staff or child can be destabilising for a community and, in particular, for the professional status of staff members who may have had allegations made against them and the emotional well-being of children and young people who may have been identified. It can also lead to a 'whispering campaign' which can undermine the school leadership or target a particular child or family.

It isn't always possible to prevent parents posting comments online, and unless the comments make a credible threat to safety (death threats or other threats of violence towards staff), name a teacher who is subject to an allegation, contain hate content or could be considered as harassment (and therefore a criminal offence has been committed) then the comments cannot always be removed (please see appendix 1 for further details on the potential legal implications).Parents are entitled to hold opinions about schools, many of which will be positive, some however might not be so pleasant but expressing these views is not always illegal. However this does not mean that this behaviour should be tolerated, especially if it is directed at specific members of the school community**. Forced removal of comments can only occur if the comments break the law or break the website's terms and conditions. The best course of action is for Headteachers to adopt a partnership approach with parents, where possible, and to speak directly with any members of the community involved when any concerns are raised.**
The key question is, how should schools respond to complaints made on social networking sites by parents/carers? The vast number of social media profiles and pages means that it can be very hard for a school to proactively monitor issues that are being discussed by parents and carers and often, will only become aware of a concern when they are brought to the school's attention by members of staff or parents who may have access to the comments.

There is no single effective method of dealing with parents and carers who raise issues on social networking sites. However, schools can take a proactive approach to minimise such incidents rather than having to be reactive and put together a quick response to stop the spread of rumours.

This short guide gives a number of processes a school can use to deal with any problems and it looks at ways to counter any repeat occurrences to ensure that parents and carers follow the traditional complaints procedures in school.

This guide will focus on Facebook as it is currently the most common source of concern; however additional guidance for reporting and responding to concerns on other popular social networking sites can be accessed via the Education Safeguarding Adviser (Online Protection).

1. **Gather evidence**

When the school becomes aware of any information that is damaging towards an individual member of staff and/or the school community, it is important to gather evidence **(such as screen shots and print-outs, includes times, dates and names where possible and ensuring the identity of the person who reported the issue is removed)** and establish exactly what has been posted. This may have to be done through various methods as the information may have only been shared through the connections of specific people. However, it is important that verbal or written evidence be submitted so that the facts can be established.

When dealing with cases involving Facebook, a group of parents may have set up a site or closed/secret group to comment about or in some cases, criticise the school or individual members of staff. This is usually done through a Facebook page which is then 'liked' by those with an account or via closed or secret group whereby members have to request to join or be invited by another group member. On a Facebook page the comments will always be public; however in a closed or secret group they will only be visible to other group members. It is important (where possible) to find out who has set up the page or group, as usually this is the parent or carer who has the grievance. **It is also essential, at this stage, that members of staff (including non-teaching staff) and governors do not become embroiled in any of the discussion threads as this sometimes can inflame the situation.** It can sometimes be difficult to trace the owner of a Facebook "page" however a closed group will publically identify the members any members and also which members are "administrators".

In some cases Parents may post comments on their own personal Facebook profiles. The visibility of these comments will depend on the individual parent's privacy settings. If a comment is public (this is indicated by the presence of a globe icon next to the post) then it will be visible to anyone who has access to the internet, even if they do not have a Facebook account. Other privacy settings may include "friends only" (only those people who are friends with the original poster can see the comment) or "friends of friends". It is important for all Facebook users to be aware that even if a comment has been shared with "friends only" it is still possible for other users to "share" their friend's comments with their own Facebook friends or take screenshots.

In cases where comments have been shared with "friends only" it is essential that headteachers ensure that the identity of the person who bought the concern to the schools attention is protected as far as possible.

2.   **Reassuring those affected**

a. Supporting Staff

If individual members of staff have been targeted or mentioned, then Headteachers will need to be mindful of their duty of care to those involved as there is a specific duty on employers to protect their staff from third party harassment.

Headteachers should explain to the member of staff how they intend to address the concerns and consider what support could be offered to them and encourage them to let school leadership know if there is any further support that they feel they need. Appropriate support will depend on the nature of the concerns and the reaction of the individual.

Staff may wish to contact their professional/teaching union for additional support and guidance or access support via the Education Support Network:
www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk

Staff and Headteachers can also access help via the Professional Online Safety Helpline:
www.saferinternet.org.uk/about/helpline

The school may also want to take further advice on this issue from Schools' Personnel Service (www.the-sps.co.uk)

Additional links:
- The Professionals online safety helpline has useful guidance for schools and settings: www.saferinternet.org.uk/news/minimising-reputational-risk-advice-for-professionals
- Childnet Teacher Guidance: www.childnet.com/teachers-and-professionals/for-you-as-a-professional
- The Department for Education Preventing and Tackling Bullying (November 2014) www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-and-tackling-bullying
- Kent Education Safeguarding Team provides advice and support via the Education Safeguarding adviser (Online Protection) and Area Safeguarding Advisers and provides online templates and guidance at: www.kelsi.org.uk/pupil_support_and_wellbeing/safety,_health_and_wellbeing/child_protection_safeguarding/e-safety.aspx
- If the Headteacher is a member of the NAHT then they also have very useful guidance on their website.

b. Other members of the community

There have been cases where negative or malicious comments posted on social media have not been about a member of staff but have been made against a child or another parent. It is important that Headteachers are aware of the need to promote the wellbeing and safety of the whole school community. However they should also be aware of some of the limitations and be clear about how achievable this may be in some cases.

In some cases there may be a requirement for Headteachers to consider the potential safeguarding impact (including emotional consequences or the potential risk to physical safety) of children if comments are made online about them by parents. This may require involvement of other external agencies in line with existing safeguarding procedures. If Headteachers are unclear they should seek advice from the Education Safeguarding Team.

When responding to issues where parents are writing negative or unkind comments about other parents, the school may need to consider how best to mediate concerns (if appropriate) and to what extent they are able to resolve concerns if they are having a detrimental impact on the school. In some cases such as where there is a concern regarding physical violence Headteachers may need to involve other agencies.

3.   Meet with parents or carers involved

In many cases the reason why a parent or carer has made comments about the school or staff members on a social networking is due to ignorance about the implications of making such comments or because they are unaware of or disillusioned with the school's complaints procedure.

The best approach to resolving this issue is to **invite the parents involved into school and to explain that the school would like to work with them to resolve the problem that is obviously causing them distress. Headteachers should address the matter of social networking with them and explain how this behaviour can have a detrimental impact on the school and potentially their children's education while not allowing the school to actually address their concerns.**

At this stage, it is important that the headteacher requests that any offending posts or pages are immediately removed and encourages the parents to work with the school, following the schools complaints procedure if they are unhappy.

It can be helpful, at this point, to discuss the importance of considering any messages they post online in the future, as these can have a detrimental impact on themselves as well as the wider school community. Parents should be made aware that comments posed online (even if made "privately") can easily be misread or misinterpreted and can also be shared without their knowledge or consent.

In the majority of incidents a meeting with the parents can resolve the matter and the headteacher can identify the particular concern and ensure that a suitable solution is put into place, or instigate the school complaints process. At this meeting it is important that printouts of the allegations or comments are available (again ensuring that any content which could identify the individual who bought it to the schools attention is removed).

Advice on how to delete or report a Facebook comment, page or group can be found in appendix 3.

If the meeting does not have a successful outcome then it is important for the headteacher to stress that the school may have to take further action to resolve the matter. Although it is essential not to cause any further problems, the professional status of staff and the school needs to be maintained and it cannot be compromised by any malicious comments or allegations. **The school may want to warn the parents that any existing comments or a continuation of posts could lead to criminal action being taken, although the school would prefer to avoid having to take this route.**

If parents refuse to remove content which breaks Facebooks terms and conditions then headteachers can report the concern to Facebook (see appendix 3) or escalate the concern to the Professional Online Safety helpline: www.saferinternet.org.uk/about/helpline .

If headteachers think that an offence has been committed or believe that speaking directly to the parents would lead to a confrontation then they should contact their Local Kent Police contact to work together and support the school in discussing this with the parent concerned in more detail.

4.   **Further Action**

If the matter is not resolved through a face to face meeting, the school has a number of options to try and address the situation. While the school will not want to escalate the matter unnecessarily, it is crucial that they try to come to a sensible and proportionate conclusion.

a. Arrange a further meeting and invite the chair of governors

To ensure that the parents understand the seriousness of the matter, a further meeting could be arranged with the chair of governors present to convey the damage that these comments are having on the school community. It is essential that the chair of governors is fully briefed before the meeting and that a common approach is taken by the school to address this matter. Again, it gives an opportunity for the parents to share any grievances and for an action plan to be established to deal with any concerns expressed by them.

b. Report offending material

If the parents do not agree to remove any offending content or pages they have set up, then the school can report offending material to Facebook etc. Usually this raises a 'ticket' with those who monitor content on the site and they assess this in relation to whether any of the terms and conditions has been violated. Schools have to be aware that there will be a time delay in the review of this content and that if the content does not breach the terms and conditions, then the site administrators will not remove it.

Information about how a range of concerns can be reported to Facebook can be found in appendix 3.

c. Take legal advice

The final step in some cases may be for a school to seek legal advice on comments posted on a social media site. In some cases this has resulted in a letter from a solicitor being sent out to the parents warning them that malicious allegations could result in legal action. Headteachers should be aware that in some cases this can have a detrimental impact and can inflame situations further so it is recommended to try all other possible routes before proceeding.

In cases where a criminal offence has been committed then police advice should be sought at an early stage. This should usually take place via 101, but if there is an immediate risk of harm to any member of the school community this should be reported via 999. It is advisable that schools record any crime reference numbers etc., even if police action is not considered to be necessary.

5. Head off further similar issues by addressing the issue with all parents

Allegations or malicious comments against members of staff or the school can have an unwanted effect on the school's ethos which can result in a detrimental effect on children and young people. It is crucial that a school ensures that these types of issues do not reoccur. The school could consider sending out a letter to parents to encourage them to be mindful about what they post on Social Networking sites and to be aware of the impact such comments could have on the school community. The letter could also include the fact that unpleasant or hurtful comments should not be posted online as they may potentially be considered as a criminal offence. The school may want to remind all parents of the schools official communication and complaints channels which are available to be used should they need them, as this is the most appropriate way of dealing with any concerns. Schools may also wish to remind parents that they can "report" any unpleasant comments or content to Facebook or other social networking sites, who may remove comments and block/ban users who break these rules. Parents should also be aware of the importance of role modelling appropriate behaviour for their children online, much like they should offline.

For template letters please see appendix 2.

6. Preventative Action

a. Home-School Agreement

Most schools have a contract between parents and the school to ensure that children and young people are fully supported with their learning and welfare both inside and out of the classroom. Many of the statements refer to parents reinforcing schools' policies on

homework, behaviour and conduct. In order to counter any parent discussing sensitive issues about individual teachers or pupils on social networks, a number of schools have decided to include a statement on the Home-School Agreement to try and stop parents from making derogatory or malicious comments. While it is difficult to monitor all parents' use of social networking sites, it does show that the school takes this matter seriously and, the fact that parents have signed the agreement, means that they have a responsibility to act appropriately.

Example statements:

"We will support the school's approach to e-Safety and will not upload, share or add any pictures, video or text that could upset, offend or threaten the safety of any member of the school community".
> **OR**

"Parents and carers are reminded to use existing structures when making any complaint about the school or a member of staff. They are advised not to discuss any matters on social networking sites'.

> **OR**

'If at any time during your child's time at Lightmoor school, you wish to make a complaint, then you are advised to follow the school's complaints procedure which can be found on the school website [insert link]. We recommend that all parents and carers refrain from using social networking sites to discuss sensitive issues about the school.'

b. Acceptable Use Policies (AUP)

All schools should have an AUP that is signed by staff and pupils to ensure that they use digital technology and the internet within school safely and understand the sanctions resulting from breaches of this policy. A number of schools have included statements that refer to parental support on this matter and these also ask parents to monitor children and young people's use of digital technology and social media while they are out of school. The policy should be reviewed and, where necessary, updated on an annual basis; and schools could include a statement on parental use of social networking. Please be aware that this approach can sometimes be difficult to enforce

Sample statement:

'As a parent, I support school policies on ICT and I will ensure that I monitor my child's use of the internet (including social media) outside of school. I will act as a positive role model to my child, by ensuring that I use social media responsibly.'

Further advice and guidance regarding AUPs can be found at www.e-safety.org.uk

c. Schools Policies (including the Complaints Policy)

Whenever there is a dispute between a parent and a school, it is important that the complaints procedure is followed so that grievances are taken seriously and solutions can be quickly found to ensure that the child or young person's education is not disrupted. The complaints policy should be easily accessible via the school's website.

Headteachers may also wish to draw attention to this concern in other related polices including anti-bullying, Safeguarding, online safety, data protection/security and confidentiality.

d. Promote positive use of social media

Some schools are now exploring the proactive use of social media as a positive engagement tool for parents. Many social media complaints arise out of parental frustrations and because parents may feel that they are not listened to or valued by schools. This is why many parents take the matter out of the schools hands and set up unofficial and unapproved Facebook pages or groups.

If a school has an official and appropriately managed Facebook page or group then this can minimise some of the concerns or ensure that the school has a way to respond appropriately via an official and approved communication channel.

In some cases Facebook pages or groups may be set up and run (either officially or unofficially) via parent teacher associations or other similar groups. It is important that in these cases the headteacher is involved in ensuring that the groups are run in accordance with the school policies and clear boundaries are in place about appropriate online behaviour. The Kent AUP template guidance includes a template policy for official parent run Facebook pages/groups.

Further guidance (including template policies etc.) can be accessed via the Education Safeguarding Adviser (Online Protection) and via www.e-safety.org.uk

e. Other approaches

The school could regularly publish positive information in the school newsletter about how concerns can be raised informally. Headteachers may want to consider implementing a range of routes to encourage parents to raise concerns directly with the school, for example ensuring a senior member of staff is available on the gate at the start and end of the school day, dedicated email accounts etc.

Conclusion

In the age of social media, all institutions need to be robust against criticisms and opinions. Complaints by parents are nothing new for schools as, in the past; many have made comments on the playground or at the school gate or have gone to local media outlets such as newspapers to highlight decisions or issues in schools. The main issue is that in today's society, these complaints can easily be shared in the public domain and a post on Facebook can reach thousands of users instantly, damaging reputations and giving a misleading slant to any issue. Schools cannot monitor every comment posted on social networking sites, but they can be proactive in trying to ensure that parents and carers are aware of their responsibility to act as a 'positive digital role model' to their children.