

School board social media policy in the works

Written by Evan Boudreau, The Catholic Register
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TORONTO - Peter Aguiar wants to have Toronto's Catholic students talking about netiquette this year.

So the Toronto Catholic District School Board is in the process of developing a formal social media policy.

"We have a responsibility to develop these policies in conjunction with students. We have to hear their voices as well," said Aguiar, co-ordinator of 21st-century learning and the academic information communication and technology department for the Toronto Catholic board. "The important thing is to start the conversation. There is a netiquette out there that we have to be a little more specific with our students about."

Like many school boards across the country the TCDSB is now paying more attention to what their students are posting online, and with good reason. Cyberbullying victims such as Amanda Todd, the British Columbia teen who took her life earlier this school year, and Jenna Bowers-Bryanton, a Nova Scotian who took her life in January 2011 at age 15, have framed this as a coast-to-coast problem.

And it's not just peers the cyberbullies are preying upon either. Last November a Brampton Catholic high school suspended seven of nine students involved in a Twitter conversation which included degrading, threatening and sexually explicit remarks directed towards three teachers. Although the school board had no social media policy at the time, it was able to discipline the students by utilizing the Catholic Code of Conduct and Ontario's Education Act.

Not only do these cases expose the range of cyberbullying attacks, they also leave school officials wondering what to do when it happens in their board.

"Messages these days can be distributed so quickly, just with the simple click of a forward button," said Aguiar. "Part of our responsibility as educators is to teach our students about the world, to teach them how to deal with each other and other adults. In some ways we've fallen behind because we didn't grow up in this (digital) world."

The Toronto board's revised Acceptable Use Policy regarding technology in general, completed about a year ago, is a step in the right direction, according to Aguiar, but it doesn't allow the board to safely navigate student use of today's technology, let alone coast into tomorrow's.

While many boards are in this position, there are a few that have developed policies specific to social media, and Aguiar said Toronto will, to some degree, model its policy around existing ones.

"Certainly we can learn from what others have done," he said. "We have to be very conscious of ourselves as a Catholic board as well and make sure it reflects our roles as Catholic educators."

The Peterborough Victoria Northumberland and Clarington Catholic District School Board is also developing a social media specific policy to supplement its existing social media guidelines.

"We were hoping to have it ready for the fall but we weren't ready for it at that point," said Nancy Sharpe, manager of communications and freedom of information/privacy for the board. "We felt that to do it correctly we wanted to make sure that we researched social media adequately."

A draft of the policy is awaiting review by the board's policy committee which, if approved, will then require the input of trustees and their constituents before being ratified. The goal is to have the policy in place by early spring.

In Toronto, Aguiar is open to the input of others during the policy's development, but he has his own ideas regarding the overall tone of the document.

"We have to make our expectations clear but not in a punitive way," said Aguiar, adding he'd like to see the policy completed within the year. "It can't just be a policy that says you shall not. It has to be a document that empowers and educates, that shows the potential for social media but also offers some common-sense guidelines based on civility, how to treat a person with respect and ... our Catholic values."