

Schools and email

eMail has become a major method of communication, and its use for communication between a teacher and parents, or even students, is increasing. In many respects emails are no different to communicating via conventional mail or fax, however there are issues which are particular to emails.

Usage Policies

Usage should be reasonable and responsible. Members should in general abide by any and all school policies regarding the usage of their school's email system. It is important to realise that, as with any internet activity, email usage is easily tracked and monitored.

Members should also be aware that it is very clear from an email where the message was sent from. It's equivalent to using school letterhead and an envelope embossed with the school crest for conventional mail.

Emails do absorb resources and it is not unreasonable for schools to request that usage be confined to essential and/or school related matters

Addresses

It is not unreasonable for a school to publish the email addresses of teachers, however only school based and/or school funded email addresses should be published (Parents, students have always been able to write to teachers at school). Teachers' home addresses, phone numbers and fax numbers should never be published.

In general you should not use your own private email to reply to emails received from parents through the school system unless you are happy for parents to have this private address. Note the caution later about keeping records of email.

Response times

A school should not give parents any indication of expected response times for email messages, nor should they require teachers to respond within a short time. Where a school wants to define guidelines for teachers, the time should be no shorter than 2 school days. Any time shorter than this could add significantly to a teacher's workload.

Members need to be aware that a rapid response can create an expectation that could be difficult to fulfil on subsequent occasions.

Messages of Complaint

All schools should have policies or procedures to be followed where a teacher receives a letter of complaint from a parent or student and these policies or procedures should apply for emails as well (for example such emails should be reviewed by and responded to by the Head of Department or a Senior Manager).

Where a meeting is requested there should be a process to ensure that individual teachers are not left to deal with distressed/angry parents (for example the policy should require a dean/senior manager to be present and to chair the meeting).

Similarly schools should have policies or procedures to follow when a teacher receives abusive or vexatious messages by letter, email or even by phone

In particular, members should think carefully and calmly before firing off a response. It is easy to include a comment in a reply that one later comes to regret.

In general best practice would be to always compose your reply to an email in a word processor, and only when you are happy with the reply, copy and paste it into your email editor. Be careful to only use the "Reply to All" option (rather than the "Reply" option) when you are sure that is what you want to do – there may be recipients you do not know about because they are in the "bcc" field.

Records

It is important that a record is kept of all emails received from parents or students and the reply. This record should be in both electronic and printed form.

The actual email messages themselves, in the form they are received, should be kept – the normally hidden routing information that accompanies the message will be useful to establish authenticity, or to establish the time a message was sent or received. It is very easy to change the wording of an email message that one has received and where two versions of the same message are produced (as has happened) it can be difficult to establish which version is authentic.

Members need to be aware that all email messages sent and received through a school email system can generally be retrieved by system administrators or technicians, including those messages which have been "deleted", and that the school has a right to do this. Note also that copies may exist on each and every external mail server that has relayed the message from its source to its destination.

Members using their own email address to reply to emails from parents or students need to be aware that electronic backups of their mail may not be readily accessible from their ISP – it is particularly important that they keep their own printed and electronic copies of mail in this situation.