

MASC: Social Media for School Committee members

The MASC Code of Ethics states a member stays “well informed concerning the duties of a Committee member on both a local and state level.” Social media can be another tool for carrying out this part of your position. The following guidelines are suggested to inform your use of social media:

Use social media as a communication tool.

As a well-informed school committee member, you're constantly in communication about your district: gathering information to inform decisions, delivering information to inform constituents. Much of that communication now takes place online. You certainly may use social media as a means of communication as a member of a school committee.

Be clear that you communicate only as an individual.

In Massachusetts, school committee members individually have no authority to speak on behalf of the district or of the committee unless specifically designated to do so. Be sure that it is clear in statements online and elsewhere that you speak only as an individual.

Avoid violating the Open Meeting Law. Recall that the Open Meeting Law (M.G.L. Ch. 30A, §§ 18-25) applies to any quorum of a body deliberating about any matter under their jurisdiction.

Online, this can be as innocuous as a post from a single committee member expressing a view regarding an upcoming decision which is then “liked” by a majority of other members of the committee. While you may well be connected through social media to other members of your committee, be very cautious in your interactions with other members of your committee.

Keep your deliberations within the meeting.

Remember that the MASC Code of Ethics for members states “a member should not make statements or promises of how he/she will vote on matters that will come before the Committee.” Your decision should be made as a result of meeting deliberation. Avoid posting content that indicates that you have already formed an opinion ahead of a deliberation at a meeting.

Make your decisions within the meeting.

While you may use social media as one way of gathering input for upcoming decisions, you have a responsibility as a committee member to make your decisions based on information given to you for your deliberation. A committee member should not make decisions based on social media popularity. Direct complaints or concerns to the appropriate channels. Just as you would with a phone call or a conversation in person, ensure that complaints and concerns are directed through the chain of command to the appropriate person in the administration.

Share public information through social media.

Sharing information about your district is a valuable function of social media. Invite the public to upcoming district events; share information about public hearings; link to the district budget. Let the community know about decisions the committee has made. Use visuals-photos, charts, graphs-- to make your news go viral. Be clear in your sharing of information that you do so as a single committee member; you are not the official keeper of records. Keep privileged information private. Information shared within executive session needs to be kept private unless and until it is reviewed and released as part of the minutes of the session per M.G.L. Ch. 30A, §22f.

Observe other applicable laws and regulations around the sharing of information.

Be certain to observe all other applicable laws, such as those surrounding student privacy. This applies not only to information about students, but also to their images. Be sure that public sharing of photos of students are covered by district release.

Consider the permanence of posting.

Remember that nothing ever disappears online; postings can be cached or captured by screenshot. Likewise, whatever privacy setting you've chosen, a screenshot can take anything public. Do not post anything on social media that is not appropriate to have publicly shared.

Stay with facts.

Should you see incorrect information in a post and have public district information that is correct, link to it in the comments. Do not, however, get into an extended back-and-forth, as those rarely lead to any place productive. The "turn off notifications" setting can be very useful here.

Stay professional.

Never, never post in anger. Ever. Don't get personal in your remarks, whatever the provocation. Be aware of recent federal court rulings regarding social media as a "designated public forum."

There have been several recent rulings in federal court that elected officials may not within a public forum block those with whom they disagree politically. This is still a developing area legally. Every member must balance this with the respect for the administration, the community, and other members which are the MASC Code of Ethics; abuse of others within your own posts should not be allowed. Ensure you abide by your district's technology use policy if using district equipment. If you have been issued a district phone, laptop, or tablet, be certain you adhere to use as directed by policy Be timely and truthful.

Both make you an excellent and trusted resource online, extending your service as a member of the school committee online.

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