

Developing Web Page Policies or Guidelines

by

Mary Alice Anderson, Media Specialist

Winona (MN)

Author note, July 2005: This article appeared in *Technology Connection*, May/June 1997 and was updated in 2000. The article is frequently requested for reprints and by school districts developing their own guidelines. Much of content reflects thinking representative of an era when school's were first developing web sites, but still may be helpful as you develop current guidelines.

Schools or districts that have a web server may consider adopting a policy or guidelines about the development of web pages and storing them on the school's or district's server. Schools that do not have their own web server but place their pages on a server belonging to an internet service provider may want to develop a policy or guidelines in addition to the policy the ISP may have. Policies or guidelines will help provide some degree of consistency, quality, and general direction of the how the school will be represented to the local Internet community and beyond. They can provide more specifics than are typically found in the more general technology/internet Acceptable Use Policies that schools have adopted. In addition, web policies or guidelines will help prevent future situations which may cause embarrassment or even a lawsuit for the school or district. Specifics will vary with local needs, but basically they should address web page content, overall responsibility, potential contributors, quality, technical standards, student protection, server access, and a statement of ownership and responsibility. Overall, the content should be clear with technical information presented in an understandable way.

Content and subject matter. A school's web presence represents the school to a potentially greater audience than any other medium. The collection of electronic documents can be an excellent way to provide

unique information about the school or a means for students and staff to present information about themselves. The web site must represent the school accurately and fairly. Content policy may address topics such as:

- * Who is our audience? The school, the local community or the larger Internet and world community?
- * Will there be a central district "home page" or will each school or even each department in the school be allowed to create its own "front door"?
- * How comprehensive should this site be? For example, will its purpose be to house and publicize all school policies and public information that is normally shared or will it be more limited in scope?
- * Should the content pertain only to the school and its curriculum and activities, or may other content be added? For example, will students and staff be permitted to create personal pages about interests and activities that are not school related/
- * How long will student work be kept on the web site?
- * Will there be guidelines specifying how often school information should be updated?

Contributors.

- * Will web page/site contributors be limited to the school student and staff population?
- * Will there be a priority for who can have a web page or will it be first come, first served?
- * Will non-profit outside groups be allowed to have a presence on the school's server or be directly linked to the school's home page? If outside groups are provided a presence will they be limited to education related groups only?
- * Will commercial content and advertising be allowed? For example, some schools may make money from advertising by local businesses; in other situations this could be a conflict of interest with a local ISP.

- * Will the district sell server space to outside groups or provide it free of charge?

Quality of content. Some quality control will provide a way of making sure the school or district is well represented. Specifics to be addressed may include:

- * Standards for grammar, spelling, and general overall physical appearance
- * Suggestions for the quality of student work that will be included. Do all students have a right to have their work published on the web or will the school only select the best work?
- * Standards for ensuring that content is worthwhile and useful to others

Technical and design standards. Web page design manuals stress the importance of good design principals, designing a pagethat will work with multiple browsers, and limiting the graphics and glitz. Generally, the recommendation is to design the page with the capabilities of dial-in-access and a 14.4 modem in mind. Technical standards may include recommendations regarding:

- * Overall size or length of a page
- * Fonts, graphic size and format
- * Backgrounds, colors, tables, image maps, sound, animations and special effects
- * Any preferred consistency such as an identifying name, logo or links that should always be present
- * Directory structure
- * Information about the page's creator and date it was added to the server
- * Mail-to links

- * Compliance with networking standards, consideration for the conventions of worldwide electronic publishing, and adherence to state and federal laws.

Student and staff safeguards. Some information kept by the school is protected under data privacy laws, other information is public. Some considerations to keep in mind include:

- * What safeguards will there be to prevent questionable material or links to questionable material in the page's immediate links?
- * Will staff phone numbers and e-mail addresses be included?
- * Will last names be used? (Internet use guidelines frequently address the importance of not using the last names of students in web documents and in e-mail.)
- * Will e-mail and/or snail address be published?
- * Will parental permission to publish a page be required?
- * If an individual wishes to publish a page that does not meet the guidelines or policies will there be due process opportunities for appeal?

Copyright, ownership, disclaimers.

- * Once information is put on the web anyone can readily access it and copy it. Do you want to give blanket permission for people to use it or do you want to encourage people to request permission?
- * Will certain information be copyright protected?
- * What responsibility does the school have for inappropriate links that are not immediate links from the school's pages?
- * Does the school district accept responsibility for everything that is published?
- * What is the relationship to other district policies such as data privacy, copyright, access, and intellectual freedom.
- * Does the district or the individual who created a page own the page?

Relationship to other policies

* Is permission to use information about a student or a picture of a student on the internet part of the school's general information release policy or should special permission be included in the web policy?

* Is the policy free of any contradictions to other district policies such as intellectual freedom, data privacy, copyright, staff ethics, and student behavior?

Server access. Once a page is prepared it must be put on the server. The policy should address who will have that right and responsibility. It may make the most sense for one or two people to have responsibility for the entire web site or it may work best to sub-divide the site with different individuals having access and responsibilities for different portions of the site. This decision must be based on the size of the site, skill level of those responsible, and the other responsibilities the individuals have.

Overall responsibility: This will address who has overall responsibility for making sure the guidelines or policy are followed. (In our district, responsibility for managing the server and approving page content is primarily given to media specialists and the district network specialist. Principals may also be involved.)

Finally, the document should have a provision for appropriate intervals for updates and review. As the web site grows and web masters and web site contributors become more experienced, different needs and considerations will arise. Technical standards are especially likely to change as technology progresses.

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