

The St Marylebone Church of England School

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Headteacher: Mrs Elizabeth Phillips OBE, BA (Hons), MA, AKC

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Dear Parent / Guardian,

RE: Use of social networking and mobile devices.

As you are probably aware, there has been a dramatic growth in internet communication via social networking websites such as Facebook. This is alongside an increased accessibility to the internet using 'Smart' phones with fast internet access.

The internet is a great tool for research, communication, and learning, and is often used in this capacity within school. Unfortunately however, this year there have been some incidents of offensive, obscene and insulting comments being made by pupils on social networking websites, often with regards to, and directed towards, other pupils. Facebook is the most frequently used site, but there are others such as Formspring, which allows pupils to post comments anonymously. This incidence of cyber-bullying has been fuelled by pupils spending increasing amounts of time on social networking websites each day through the use of their mobile phone in school.

As a school we have a very strict mobile phone policy, which states that while in school, phones should be switched off and in the bottom of students' bags. If a student is seen with their phone out of their bag, or if it rings during a lesson, the phone will be immediately confiscated. Whilst this rule is applied consistently throughout the school, there are still times when students break the rules, and use their mobile phones in school.

We have become concerned that, as much of the socialising our students do has now moved online, they are scared that if they go 'offline' for any period of time they will miss out on important developments within their friendship groups. Not only does this mean that students are regularly breaking the school rules around mobile phone usage, it is also leading pupils to stay up late at night, whether this is on a computer in their room or in bed with their mobile. This leaves them tired the following day, and severely impedes their progress and learning in school.

When friendship issues arise online, pupils tend to be far more antagonistic towards each other, with the lack of face-to-face interaction generating a sense of impunity. Furthermore, because any insults made are in the public domain, they are there for all to see, which means that other pupils in the year group are drawn into the dispute. The feelings of resentment and bitterness generated by comments posted online invariably come up in school the next day, and cause various arguments which can be difficult to resolve.

As a school, we are very concerned by these issues, and have gathered from some parent workshops that this concern is shared by you, the parents. It has been noted that parents would like further guidance on how to monitor their childrens' use of social networking and online or mobile communication (including Blackberry Messenger – BBM). The Pupil Achievement Team has discussed this at length, and has come up with some recommendations which we feel may help. These are by no means steadfast 'rules', but we hope that they provide a further source of guidance for all parents.

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Recommendations:

- *Use of computers and laptops*

We recommend that computers and laptops are not kept in your daughters' bedrooms, and instead in communal areas where you can see what your daughter is looking at online – this is particularly the case at night when they may be likely to stay up late posting and reading comments.

- *Mobile phones*

We recommend that mobile phone usage is monitored closely – again, this is particularly the case at night. There are many parents who take their daughters' phone from them when they go to bed and give it back to them in the morning. This is a very successful strategy, encouraging openness and trust, and we would strongly advise it.

We would also appreciate your support in tackling the use of mobile phones in school. We understand that it is necessary for students to have mobile phones on them for their journeys to and from school; however, we are very clear in our message that they should not be used in school. If your daughter should need to contact you during school hours, she can do so at reception. We would appreciate your support in conveying this message.

- *Facebook and other social networking sites*

We believe that it is important for parents to have access to what is being said by their daughters on Facebook. In some cases, parents have their daughters' passwords which can be helpful. Others are "friends" with their daughters which is also a successful strategy. We are aware that it isn't possible to monitor everything that your daughter posts online, and that it is important that students are given some privacy, but it is advisable that you are able to access the content of this communication if necessary.

To summarise, we present these recommendations as guidance, and hope that you find it useful. St Marylebone School prides itself on having a strong community ethos, which encourages openness, honesty and sharing, and we are entirely committed to the safeguarding of our students.

Thank you in advance for your support on this, and please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions or concerns.

Yours sincerely,

The Pupil Achievement Team.