

August 3, 2006

Relevant feedback from schools regarding listservs:

X School has a PTA listserv that is open to all who want to join it. All may post, but all messages require moderator approval before they go out. The list is not for discussion, but rather for sending out school and community news.

Moderator sends out only info pertinent to school (no ads for anything community based, must be school based only.)

We have no "hard" guidelines, although we decided to make our list moderator controlled to prevent "flaming" messages. Every message comes to moderator for posting approval.

This online forum was set up for sharing news and announcements, and for holding general discussions relevant to the X School community. This forum is open only to members of the X School community (parents, grandparents, guardians, teachers, staff, neighbors, etc.)

The X School PTA has two listservs, but no specific guidelines.

Moderator allows message to go out on list initially, but if it seems to be a discussion just between a couple of people, moderator asks that the discussion string be moved off list. A lot of the other e-groups that I'm part of send out etiquette postings too. Moderator had a "How to" sheet for what to do and not to do, *i.e.* trim your posts so that they aren't too long, "reply to sender" if you want to have a personal conversation and not have the entire list involved, no "flaming" messages (be courteous and respect everyone's options), etc. It was basically a paraphrased version of the etiquette rules listed on the MCCPTA website and from my other groups; moderator combined the best ones together.

We have one for discussion, which is a free Yahoo listserv that has about X email addresses. After "a fall event", we had about X very angry emails from parents. Based on this barrage of emails, we decided to pay for our own web site and set up some controls.

These are the rules for the X School Listserve.

List serve rules:

1. Before a member is approved, they are asked their relationship/interest in the school (parent/staff member/neighbor/etc)
2. Any message posted must be approved by a moderator
3. The message must have appropriate content
4. The message must be of general interest to listserv members
5. The message must not be promoting the commercial interests of an individual or business
6. The listserv is not a discussion board

We just have a list serve that sends out messages. No discussions. No responses.

The X School listserv guidelines stress courtesy versus what is/isn't permitted. The site is for parents and staff, NOT students.

The description of the Yahoo.com group is:

An open discussion group for all parents and staff of X School to provide information on upcoming events, volunteer opportunities and other school related issues.

The school Net was created primarily as a means for the school PTA and staff to quickly and easily communicate important information with parents. It also can be used for parents to share helpful and age-appropriate information with one another (i.e., PTA and school programs, Montgomery County programs, child care and youth activities). These guidelines are intended to keep the volume of messages at a reasonable level and to ensure that the school Net remains a reliable means of communication.

Parents are asked to be courteous towards others in their communications on the school Net. In addition, the school Net abides by the Yahoo! Groups Terms of Service: (<http://docs.yahoo.com/info/terms/>) and Yahoo! Groups Guidelines: (<http://groups.yahoo.com/local/guidelines.html>)

By registering to participate in the school Net, you are agreeing to comply with these same Terms of Service and Guidelines.

School Net encourages all members of its community to use electronic communications in a manner that is respectful to others. Appropriate language, behavior and style are expected. Sending harassing, frivolous, or excessive messages, including chain letters and junk mail are inappropriate. Sending mass messages containing commercial,

political, lobbying, petitions, or unverified public announcements is not allowed, nor are attachments.

The X school information list is in a "daily digest" format. All posts are moderated. (biggest problem is resent posts which carry extra names...etc.-to save space, they are reposted with only relevant copy)

Acceptable posts need only to be points of interest in the X school community and have included cluster, mcccpta, md state and national news. (Recently we had a lost dog located that was listed from a volunteer from the animal shelter - it was found close to a feeder school - so moderator listed it)

Non acceptable posts would be political, religious, or "idea" rants which may be unacceptable to some school community members.

There are no written guidelines for the X School Listserv. The guidelines, as presented to me when I took over the job were as follows:

#1

Only X school families can be part of the list. We verify those who want to sign up against a list. There will occasionally be some who wants to join, who aren't part of the school, who are rejected. There is no mechanism in place to make sure people de-enroll once their children leave X school.

#2

The list of e-mail addresses is kept completely private

#3

Notices are approved by the moderator and attachments are allowed as long as there is a reason for one. We are not set up as a chat list, so replies only go to the person who put the message on the list, not the moderator.

#4

The moderator/owner is to use his/her best judgment when posting messages to determine whether or not they are appropriate. When unclear, moderator has enlisted the opinion of the PTA Executive Board and tried to do this in a "blind" manner so the board is judging the message only and not the person who posted it.

The only controversy there has been is when it comes to posting information regarding issues which might have controversy behind them like info on the grading policy, etc. The list is for informational purposes and what some might deem information, others have considered opinions.

Anyone can post messages, but all messages are reviewed before they go out to everyone and that review happens by a moderator.

The only other complaint I've heard of is when multiple messages get posted in the same day, which does happen sometimes.

Unfortunately, we did have a situation last year regarding "a controversial issue."

The email community was quick to indicate that it was too much, and why. For example, the following (minus the names and any indication of gender via asterisks) shows a taste of the discussion:

"The question is not whether *'s viewpoint should be banned but rather whether ** use of the school net to broadcast ** political views warrants ** being banned from the net."

* - Individuals name
** - his/him or her

There were many emails related to: what is appropriate; and whether the user that was perceived as abusing the list should be banned. After losing a few members, it eventually calmed down.

During this time there was a brief period (about a day and a half) where it was reported from multiple sources that the controversial parent's children no longer attended school X and the parent was removed as a member of the list. When it turned out that the parent still had a child attending the school (reported by others on the list), the controversial member was immediately re-instated and an apology was sent. It is important to note that during this brief period, no attempts to post to the list were made via the controversial parent.

In my opinion, the key is attempting to keep the discussion civil, and relevant to the purpose of the list.

I am not sure what you are looking for but we have this added disclosure to all our emails.

If you no longer wish to receive e-mail notices from the X School PTA, please reply to this email and change the subject line to "Please remove me from listname." Please include your first and last name.

Summary of the Maryland State PTA bylaws, Article III.g: PTA Members in their official capacities shall not, directly or indirectly, participate or intervene (in any way, including the publishing or distributing of statements) in any political campaign on behalf of, or in opposition to, any candidate for public office.

We only have one list serve for Parents only. Moderator is the only one with access to the email address's and only info about what is happening at X school goes out. Political issues, advertisements and endorsements of any sort are not included. All emails are sent out blindly so that no one sees anyone else's email address.

I don't know what you mean by discussion but if it is in regard to a political issue then NO. We handle that at PTA meetings. We do send out notice of the upcoming meetings and encourage everyone to come.

It is just to keep parents informed about what is happening at X school or with the feeder schools. The students rarely come home with info so the parents appreciate being kept abreast with info.

Here are the rules for listserv -- established by the X school PTA in X year and now operating on Yahoo Groups with X members:

Listserv is an e-mail network sponsored by the PTA Executive Board. You must have a child attending X school or be a staff member to subscribe. The network's purpose is to provide up-to-date information about PTA business, school affairs, or educational matters. At the moderator's discretion community-related announcements (not individual) may also be posted. This network is designed to be an interactive bulletin board and not a discussion board or a chat room. This network is an extension of the "newsletter." It is not a substitute for attending monthly PTA meetings. Typical content appropriate for the listserv would be announcements and reminders of meetings and school events, announcements of non-commercial educational information, requests for volunteers, emergency closing announcements, questions on who to contact for information about the school, or questions about who to contact for information on extracurricular activities. Questions or announcements of personal services or events that are not school related should begin with the abbreviation "OT", for "Off Topic" in the subject line. Listserv is not a forum for discussing MCPS policies or specific teachers, students, parents, or staff members. Similarly, listserv is not a forum for religious advocacy or political advocacy (with the exception of educational issues upon which the PTA has taken a position consistent with its bylaws. It should be noted that the PTA as a tax -exempt organization may not support or oppose any candidate for office, directly or indirectly.) Personal attacks, hostile remarks, and foul language, of course, are not appropriate and are not permitted on the network. Common courtesy is mandatory. The system will be monitored to insure its proper use. Anyone who does not adhere to the above guidelines will have their listserv privileges suspended for two weeks. A second violation of the guidelines will result in being deleted as a subscriber.

1. The listserv will continue to be the vehicle for sharing school community related news and information, as before.
2. The listserv is available to all members of the listserv to post any item that falls within the bounds of school community related news and information.
3. Any listserv member may respond to the posted item, whether to "sender" or to "all."

4. NEW RULES

A. Once a person has posted an item, that person may, once more, post to "all" any clarification and/or addition to that item. Any additional postings responding to any member comments must be to individual SENDER of that comment. Conversely, any member responding to a posting may respond to "all" ONE time. Any additional comments on a particular posting must be made to the sender of the posting being responded to. This limit to "all" responses will alleviate much of the back and forth many of us are tired of seeing, but does not censor those of you who feel a need to comment on every comment. Continued postings to all, in violation of the new use rules, will result in that person being restricted from listserv use. The default response of the listserv is to sender, so it takes an overt act to send a message to "all."

B. Exempt from multiple postings to "all" on a similar topic are PTA board members and committee persons keeping us informed of a particular issue, MCCPTA reps, school administration and, from time to time, any other person or persons posting a topic that is continual and relevant to the school community (such as Booster Club).

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This is just a reminder that the listserv is not an appropriate forum to single out or criticize individual teachers or staff. Concerns that can't be resolved with the particular teacher should be elevated to the appropriate resource teacher or assistant principal. This avoids publicly humiliating an individual while ensuring that the concern is brought to the attention of an administrator who might actually be able to address the concern.

Also, it is important to take care in drafting messages to the listserv. In a small community such as X school it is often possible to identify individuals even without specifically naming the individual.

ADVOCACY POSTINGS

This type of message is not only appropriate, but is completely in line with the mission and goals of all PTAs:

--To support and speak on behalf of children and youth in our schools, in our community, and before government agencies and other organizations that make decisions affecting children;

--To assist parents in developing skills they need to raise and protect their children; and

--To encourage parent and public involvement in the public schools of this nation.

Common violations of listserv rules include soliciting business, advocating for political candidates, and posting messages about individual situations rather than school community news. For example, our school listserve is not the appropriate forum to discuss a child's specific circumstances or to mention that one is available professionally as a consultant or tutor.