FROM THE KASB EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, DR. JOHN HEIM

“All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”
Gandolf, The Fellowship of the Ring

We called him Gorgeous George, but not to his face. We may have been idiots, but not complete idiots. It was a moniker born of adolescent respect (and his penchant for pale blue leisure suits) with no malicious intent. That respect was based upon the singular characteristic of the man that was obvious to anyone who met him, one that was especially clear to teenagers who can root out a fake like a hog can a truffle. George Madelen looked for, and found, the good in everyone.

Mr. Madelen was principal at Hutchinson High School during the 1970s. From 1974-76 he had in his charge a supercilious gang of knuckleheads set on pushing every button and crossing every boundary that a high school could throw at them. Yet he was never angry, always professional, and had such an obvious love of students that even when he doled out punishment it was impossible to be angry with him. He pushed us, pulled us, and did everything he could to help us find the good in ourselves.

Mr. Madelen died last month at the age of 88. At the funeral his family told wonderful stories about how he affected their lives. I wonder if they knew how many hundreds of students their father and grandfather also affected in a positive way. He lived a long life and helped so many people along the way.

Mr. Madelen would have been in his mid to late 40’s when I was a sixteen year old Salthawk. That’s about the same age as the executive director of the Oklahoma State School Boards Association when he was taken from us last fall. Like Mr. Madelen, Jeff Mills was a college athlete who came to education as a teacher and coach. He was a high school principal, superintendent, and finally executive director for OSSBA. While he was taken in the prime of his life, he shared so many characteristics with my principal Mr. Madelen. Mainly, he saw the good in people and helped them see it in themselves.

Jeff was a trusted colleague who cared about students. He was an example to me of how one tolerates
What you need to know: Using social media as a school board member

Social media has drastically changed the way we consume and share information. Used conscientiously, this media opens up a host of opportunities for school board members to inform the public on matters before the board and to obtain input from those who may not otherwise be in attendance at regular school board meetings. This article summarizes some of the legal hotspots social-networking board members need to be mindful of and gives some pointers for responsible social media use.

There are three main areas of the law that board members should always consider prior to writing or commenting on posts having to do with school district business: the Kansas Open Meetings Act (K.S.A. 75-4317 et seq.), student and employee privacy law, and the Kansas Open Records Act (K.S.A. 45-201 et seq.).

First, the Kansas Open Meetings Act, or KOMA, is the law ensuring board action and board meetings are open to the public. A meeting, as defined in K.S.A. 75-4317a, means “any gathering or assembly in person or through the use of a telephone or any other medium for interactive communication by a majority of the membership of a body or agency subject to this act for the purpose of discussing the business or affairs of the body or agency.” As you all know, there are restrictions on when regular and special board meetings will be called, notice provisions, etc. So, what does this have to do with social media? For example, suppose a board member has a private Facebook page, viewable only by the individuals he or she selects as “friends.” Among these friends are all the other school board members and selected members of the community, parents of students, and district students. What if the board member uses his Facebook wall to post status updates concerning pending board action? For example, “Our middle school facilities stink. I for one will be voting ‘yes’ to a bond issue adding new middle school locker rooms and a new practice gym. What say you?” Suddenly, a topic of discussion before the board is proposed in a venue not open to the public, and it entices community and other board member discussion of this issue. If three other board members comment on or “like” the post, arguably a violation of KOMA has occurred.

Second, there are various privacy laws providing protections for district students and staff. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act at the federal level and K.S.A. 72-6214 at the state level provide students and their parents privacy rights with regard to personally identifiable student records. Similarly, school district employees have privacy rights concerning their employment records and any disciplinary actions taken against them unless disclosure is authorized by law, the negotiated agreement for applicable staff, or by the employee’s own permission. This is why the KOMA permits boards to go into executive session to discuss matters affecting an identified student or pertaining to personnel. So, as a board member, you are privy to protected information about students and staff that you would not have access to outside of your elected office. Therefore, care must be taken to avoid divulging that information in any way that would be a violation of law or district policy. For example, if responding to a blog post from a patron who is fired up about the board action to terminate the contract of a popular district basketball coach, you will have to refrain from backing up that board action with information about the district’s investigation of that coach and confirmation of allegations of sexual harassment and bullying of student athletes, despite the urge to do so.

Finally, the Kansas Open Records Act, or KORA, provides that any recorded information which is made, maintained, kept by, or in the possession of the school be open to the public, with a few exemptions. So, when using your district-provided laptop, iPad, or e-mail address, board members must be mindful that material posted therefrom or maintained thereon could be subject to disclosure given the right request. Similarly, there’s always the chance that communications sent not from school equipment or e-mails but made in the capacity as a board member on topics related to the operation of the district will be requested to be disclosed.

With this in mind, KASB’s legal staff makes the following recommendations to board members utilizing social media.

1. Remember the newspaper principle. Never post anything online that you wouldn’t be comfortable seeing on the front page of the paper, or, worse yet, having to testify in a legal action about your comments.

2. Be mindful of what information you are sharing. Never share anything which is a topic of discussion in executive session, which is privileged information shared by the board attorney, or which you only received by virtue of being a board member that is not available to the public.

3. Some conversations are best suited for face-to-face encounters. For some reason, we have a tendency to be more assertive and argumentative in text than we would be in a private conversation, and the impact of these statements is only exacerbated by the fact that the written words leave a record of our statements and don’t always infer the tone we intended in the first place.

4. If a post or blog infuriates you about a school issue, sleep on it before providing any response…if you respond at all. It’s so easy in the heat of a moment to divulge information or make statements that you will later regret. Don’t let a moment of fury haunt you for the remainder of your term.

5. Don’t use discriminatory, abusive, bullying, profane, threatening, or otherwise offensive language. Remember that you are holding public office, and your comments may impact not only your image as a board member and role model but also may reflect poorly on the rest of the school board and the district itself.

6. Refrain from advocating a yes or no vote on a bond issue, promoting your own business through your position on the board, and making comments that suggest you’re speaking on behalf of the board when you’re really only speaking for yourself.
Get in the game phrase used to motivate, inspire during tough situations

One of the greatest challenges of leadership is moving people forward when they would rather stand still. As a former coach (some would say old coach) I can remember many times telling players to “get in the game.” It was a phrase used to motivate, inspire, and push for better performance. It was generally used when situations were tough and the scoreboard was not in our favor.

At this time of the year politics don’t appear to be going our way. As a leader, how are we going to respond? (I know, I know you’re thinking, I’m in education not politics.) Yes, we are educational leaders and some of us don’t like politics. Well, like it or not, we are in politics. Not the kind that means you are seeking office, but rather the type of politics in which we are responsible to educate and to influence. The politics that we must engage in focuses on changing people’s opinions, or as some would say “winning hearts and minds.”

How can we influence others and help generate support for public education? We must do it several ways. First, we need to open the schoolhouse doors and invite in the public. Once parents and community members are in our buildings they will see all of the positive learning activities teachers are using to impact students. They will gain a better understanding of the importance of our mission. Visitors will see students using technology, involved in cooperative, project learning, and a higher level of engagement in the learning process. Understanding that students don’t sit in rooms full of desks looking at the chalkboard will be an enlightening experience for many people.

Second, we must lead our site councils and community leaders in conversations about WHY we do what we do. We must share the VALUE of public education. In current arguments or debates we have allowed the focus to be on expenditures instead of investments. We have allowed others to determine that efficiency is more important than effectiveness. As leaders we must frame the discussions in terms that focus on the value of public education, not the costs. Benjamin Franklin did more than fly a kite; he stated, “an investment in knowledge pays the best interest.” As leaders we need to make sure we are always sharing the great things that happen everyday in our district and buildings.

The third and final thought: SPEAK UP! We must be ready with the facts, and share them. I recently read the State of Kansas ranks fourth in the nation in percent of contribution to public education. This is a true statement, but it is incomplete and misleading. The complete statement would include that in the early 1990s Kansas Legislators decided that property tax relief was needed as well as increasing funds for public education. Property taxes were lowered and the state’s contribution was raised by design to equalize educational opportunities, and disperse tax burdens across the state.

Without the entire story it is easy to misinterpret the message. The good news for public education is that we don’t have to mislead or tell part of the story. The Kansas education model works. We are not where we need to be related to educating all students, but it is worth noting that more students are achieving at higher levels in Kansas now versus any other point in time. In these difficult financial times for Kansas, public educational achievement has continued to trend upward. Indicators of the educational impact in Kansas include higher graduation rates, higher post secondary success, and progress on closing the “gap” between socioeconomic groups, race/ethnicity, and gender.

If you are looking for more facts to better tell the story, refer to: http://talkmankasb.blogspot.com. Mark Tallman does a great job of discussing both sides of educational issues. You will gain insights that allow you to better share your public education story as you educate your stakeholders.

This article started today by talking about coaching and ended by challenging leaders to educate the public. I hope everyone will take the opportunity to speak up. It is our responsibility to tell our story because it is a story that must be told. It is “time to get in the game.”

Social media for board members

7. If you are going to use social media to get public opinion on board action, be sure to just use it as a listening tool. Do not share your positions on items before the board, and do not engage other board members in discussions that need to take place in an open meeting.

8. Comply with relevant law and board policies in posting online.

9. Keep your superintendent informed of what you’re doing online, so he/she can address any concerns with your use of these tools.

If you’re not sure if your use is appropriate, don’t hesitate to ask. Contact your local attorney or the KASB attorneys at 800-432-2471 with any questions on use of social media in your role as a board member.

All we have to decide

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politics as a necessary evil to help students. Jeff was taken too soon, while Gorgeous George lived a full life. Something about that doesn’t seem fair, but Jeff never complained and wouldn’t now if he could.

There is a lesson here for all of us. We don’t know what tomorrow will bring, so we have to do all the good we can today. Rest in peace gentlemen, you were both a role model for me and hundreds of others. Educators, live your lives in such a way that someone will write similar words about you someday.

Read more from Dr. Heim on his blog “I’m from Kansas” at http://heimkasb.blogspot.com
Nominations for 2014-15 Leadership for Tomorrow program due March 14

The Kansas Association of School Boards is accepting nominations for the Leadership for Tomorrow Class of 2014-15. Any past graduate of the program can nominate colleagues for the program and individuals can self-nominate. Once nominated, an application and further instructions will be sent to the nominee.

Nominations are due by March 14, 2014, and announcement of selection will be made by April 1, 2014.

Through five two-day sessions, the KASB Leadership for Tomorrow program creates a greater understanding of the Kansas public education system and provides opportunities to develop leadership skills for effective governance and raising student achievement.

The program is open to any KASB member district’s school board member or school administrator. Participation is limited.

For further information or to nominate a colleague, please contact Carol Pitts, KASB assistant executive director for communications and marketing, cpitts@kasb.org.