January 13, 2011

To Mrs. Saslaw, Dr. Wright, and Members of the Board:

The Virginia Society for Technology in Education represents over five thousand public school teachers, administrators, and higher education faculty. With a mission to promote excellence in education through professional development, VSTE endeavors to support the integration of existing and emerging technologies.

Recently, the VSTE Board reviewed the Board of Education's //Proposed Guidelines for the Prevention of Sexual Misconduct & Abuse in Virginia Public Schools// dated November 18, 2010 with revisions dated January 13, 2011. VSTE agrees with the overall intention of these guidelines to prevent inappropriate conduct between employees and students in Virginia's public schools. However, we join with other organizations such as the Virginia Association for Curriculum and Development (VASCD) to voice concerns about the limitations placed on social media communications; moreover, we submit these guidelines are in conflict with goals established in the 2010-15 Educational Technology Plan for Virginia . We disagree with assumptions that social media communications and one-on-one conversations between teachers and students, if allowed, will be inappropriate in nature. Research demonstrates the critical link between educator and learner relationships and their value to high levels of learning which is expected and needed in today's schools. For this to occur in this day and time, connectivity via bricks and mortar as well as virtually is vital, cost effective, and just makes good common sense.

Technologies used in education do not create inappropriate interactions and therefore prohibiting their use would not prevent these siuations. Professionalism should be at the heart of the effort to prevent inappropriate interactions. The medium is not the issue; in fact, educators should model appropriate digital citizenship when using technology to communicate in appropriate, timely, and powerful ways. VSTE strongly advocates for professional development and training materials to better prepare educators to leverage the technology for positive interactions with students.

In the last several years, VSTE has written extensively about and showcased examples of schools in Virginia using social media and mobile learning applications to create dynamic educational environments. Student use of such technology is in line with the National Educational Technology Plan as well as the 2010-15 Educational Technology Plan for Virginia and involves the development of skills that are critical to their future success in college and the workforce. Joining with the VASCD, we disagree with language that suggests model policies for electronic communications with students should be restricted to "accounts, systems, and platforms provided by the school division" and argue that setting up such in-house systems would be far from the cost neutral claim provided in the document's conclusion. Additionally, opening the door to directives for divisions to use only in-house technology solutions, even in this narrow case, is a dangerous precedent. The Virginia Board of Education should not be in the business of codifying the source of solutions to technology-based instructional matters anymore than it should be declaring

that lessons that meet the standards of learning should only be developed in-house.

The crafting of these guidelines to protect our students from inappropriate forms of contact, while well intentioned, could serve to halt innovation in classrooms all over the Commonwealth. We ask that you revisit the language of this policy so that teachers seeking to build appropriate relationships with students utilizing new forms of communication will not be hampered by the potential actions of a few with ill intent. If you would like the input of our organization in this effort, we would be more than willing to work with you.

Respectfully Submitted,

Karen Richardson, VSTE Executive Director
On Behalf of the Virginia Society for Technology in Education Board of Directors