The headlines conjure up every parent's nightmare: "Teachers fired for flirting on Facebook with students."

The New York Post reported this week that three New York City teachers are accused of inappropriate "friending" - and worse. One teacher left comments like, "This is sexy," under girls' pictures, school officials told the paper. Others made lewder comments, and some even used Facebook to initiate real-life relationships with students, it said. All three have been fired.

New York holds no monopoly on disturbing stories involving teachers and social networks. In Pennsylvania, a teacher was suspended after students saw photos of her on Facebook posing with a stripper. In Florida, a teacher was suspended after posting a note saying he "hated" his students and his school. A Washington, D.C., special education teacher faced scrutiny after the phrase, "You're a retard, but I love you," was found on her personal page. In August, a 54-year-old math and science department supervisor was fired after she called her students "germ bags," on Facebook and described parents as snobby and arrogant. And news stories have chronicled the discoveries of photos showing teachers in compromising situations, striking sexual poses or drinking alcohol in glorified ways.

But the issue cuts both ways. In Colorado, students created a fake profile of a teacher and tried to portray him as a pedophile. Meanwhile, biting teacher parodies abound, and Facebook is littered with Web sites that publicly attack teachers and administrators.

Social networking is a digital minefield for school districts, adding to the already complex world of teacher-student relationships. Many districts are struggling to set workable policies around social networking, while at the same time, using Facebook and other similar tools as part of their educational program. How do they create virtual boundaries that protect teachers and students without squelching potentially useful technology tools?

In New York City, school officials said they had no specific policy on use of social networks by teachers. But around the country, some districts are laying down the law. The situation has become so untenable that Lee County, Fla., recently told teachers they simply shouldn't "friend" students. The state of Louisiana has gone one step further. Last fall, Gov. Bobby Jindal signed a law that essentially makes Facebook contact with students illegal.

"It's wonderful that our teachers and administrators can now directly email our kids and work on assignments quickly over the Internet, but we cannot allow these same devices to be used as an avenue to prey on our children, out of sight of parental supervision," Jindal said in signing the law. "This new law is an important step to help protect our children from abusive and plainly inappropriate communications from educators."

Keeping kids and teachers away from each other on Facebook may seem to be an obvious precaution, but it's not as simple as it sounds. Many districts now encourage Facebook use by using fan pages, which are far easier to update than websites, to publish announcements or school photographs, while at the same time discouraging school-related use by teachers. Some teachers say they like being connected to students online because they can see if the kids are up to no good; others fret that they could incur additional legal liability if they failed to report things they saw online.

Lisa Soronen, staff attorney of the National School Boards Association, said the agency doesn't have an official position on Facebook use, but she regularly gives talks about its peril.
“If it were me, and I were a teacher, I’d say just don’t do it,” she said. “Don’t engage in social networking with students at all. The name says it all. It’s about social networking. Social. Those are not the kinds of relationships that teachers are supposed to have with students. ... A wise district says to teachers that they should never engage in peer-like activity with students -- ever. Every interaction between students and teacher should be professional.”

School district-issued email addresses or social networks set up by the district to allow students to communicate are sufficient tools to take advantage of new technologies, she said.

**Photo with a stripper posted**

Of course, telling teachers not to “friend” students is one thing. Keeping students from finding teachers’ pictures and information is quite another. Outside obviously creepy activity like the allegations from New York, most school district Facebook headaches have come as the result of accidents, such as incorrectly managed privacy settings or other typical Facebook foibles.

“A surprisingly large number of school employees don’t know about their settings, and they assume (their information) is private,” said Michael Simpson, general counsel for the National Education Association, a teachers union. “Most of them get into trouble because of that.”

Simpson cited a series of “hit pieces” run by newspapers around the country that saw reporters hunt on Facebook for teachers who had unintentionally left their profiles open to the public, then publish embarrassing results.

In one such piece, headlined “When Young Teachers Go Wild on the Web,” a Washington Post reporter found that teachers exposed questionable postings to anyone who joined the Washington, D.C., network on Facebook. One elementary school teacher, for example, wrote in her profile: “I only have two feelings: hunger and lust. Also, I slept with a hooker. Be jealous.”

Other postings were much tamer, but still might be considered questionable for teachers who present themselves as authority figures to children each day, such as the substitute teacher photographed lying down with a bottle of tequila next to her head.

Soronen, the school board association official, noted that Facebook is in the business of getting people to share information about themselves, and said teachers need to recognize that.

“(Facebook’s) interests are not aligned with the interests of a user who wants to stay private,” she said. She cited recent repeated changes to Facebook’s privacy settings, which often left users exposing more information than they realized.

**Not in college any more**

A related problem, Soronen says, is that many young teachers making the leap from college to their first job make some mistakes along the way – or don’t know how to strip their online lives of potentially embarrassing pictures and statements. Teachers, fairly or unfairly, are like public figures in their communities and have to take a very conservative approach to Internet use, she said.

“What was appropriate in college or postings made in college just aren’t appropriate now,” she said. “School districts should offer professional development around this. All the ignorant behavior can be trained away.”

Of course, all embarrassing Facebook moments can’t be eliminated. Sometimes, they don’t even involve active participation by the victim. Ginger D'Amico, a teacher in Brownsville, Pa., was suspended for 30 days this year after a friend posted a picture of her on Facebook with a stripper at a bachelorette party attended by a group of teachers. D'Amico asked that the photo be removed within days, but not before it was brought to the attention of school officials. With the help of the American Civil Liberties Union, D'Amico sued and won back pay.

But the story shows how hard it is for a teacher to have control over what goes on Facebook and who sees it.
Fake profiles attack teachers, administrators
On the other side of the coin, it’s nearly impossible for teachers to control their Facebook personas. While teachers are told not to engage with students, students have a constitutionally protected right to parody and criticize teachers and administrators online, including social networking sites.

In Florida, a student named Katherine Evans was suspended and faced other punishments for creating a Facebook fan page devoted to calling her English teacher “The worst teacher I’ve ever met,” and inviting others to join. With help from the ACLU, Evans sued and earlier this year a U.S. District Court in Florida sided with her, forcing the school district to clear her record.

Randall Marshall, legal director of the ACLU of Florida, said that the law is still evolving on the issue of what is and isn’t permissible for students to say online.

“Prior to electronic media, no one would have claimed that a student saying something negative in a mall about a teacher or a school wasn’t protected speech, and I don’t think a school would have contemplated trying to discipline a student for that,” he said. “So we start from a premise that that’s how you have to first look at these kinds of things.”

The little bit of applicable, established law in this area says this: School districts generally have no right to control what students say off campus unless their speech could lead to a serious disruption on campus – say, inciting a riot – or unless the off-campus speech is transported onto campus by a student. But technology continues to muddy the legal waters. What about Facebook parody pages that are accessed by students using school computers or mobile devices while on campus? Marshall wouldn’t hazard a guess.

Ironically, in two Pennsylvania cases with very similar facts decided on the same day earlier this year, two Circuit Court panels reached opposite conclusions. In the first case, involving a middle school student who created a MySpace page insinuating that his principle was a pedophile, the panel found in favor of the school, citing potential disruption. In the second case, another middle-school student created a profile critical of his principal, indicating that he used marijuana, and inspired other students to do the same. Despite the fact that some of the sites were accessed on school grounds, the judicial panel found in favor of the student, saying no serious disruption of school activities occurred. Both cases are now being considered by the entire U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, which will try to sort out the legal mess.

“This truly is a fascinating area,” Marshall said. “We’re trying to apply old legal principles to new situations, and that can be a challenge.”

Where is the respect?
For Simpson, the teachers union attorney, there is an age-old principle that would help sort out the mess, but it seems in short supply.

“Part of the problem with schools is we don’t have that respect from students to teachers anymore,” he said. “My sense is that teachers should be respected by students, not just in school but also when they are out of school ... and students should be held accountable for what they do online.”

One other factor complicating the virtual boundaries between teachers and students is that all professions have seen a collapse of the hard division between work and home life. Employees are now expected to read work email at home, but they also often shop for Christmas presents at work.

Soronen said the breakdown of this division has made life even harder for teachers.

“Since the dawn of time, teachers have engaged in behavior they don’t want the whole world to know about, but before the Internet, no one found out about it,” she said. “Now all this behavior can be depicted online in unexpected ways. The fact that a teacher got drunk at a party has been happening forever, but now there is a change in who can know, and what it means for them to know.”