"Tweeting:" No Longer Just for the Birds
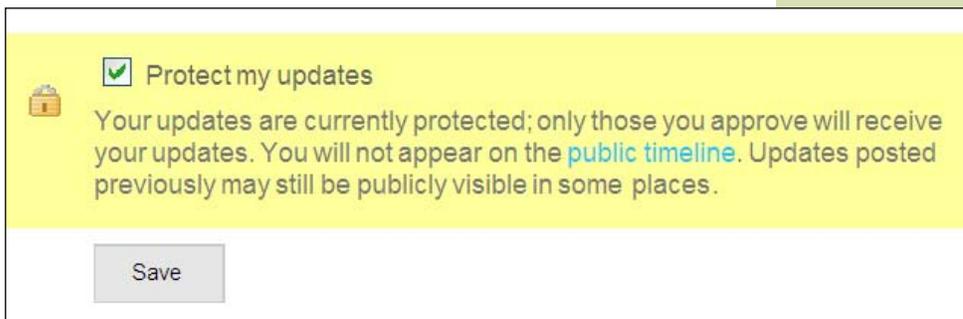
DoDEA computer networks prohibit access to the social networking Web site Twitter. However, DoDEA students and staff can still access Twitter on personal cell phones (or other mobile devices) and from home. For good or ill, millions of people have signed on to Twitter because they consider it an effective communication platform. For example, during post-election protests in Iran, the U.S. Department of State requested that Twitter postpone site maintenance to keep the social network running. Because the information officially available to journalists in Iran was limited, keeping Twitter online allowed the State Department to monitor critical events through the "tweets" of Iranian citizens.

The ease with which Twitter allows information to be shared is its chief asset. For individual users, however, this could also become the principal threat. Because Twitter is designed to help users broadcast their daily activities and thoughts, students may disregard their personal security and privacy by posting too much information online. With some understanding, however, it is easy to help students protect themselves from sexual predators, cyber-bullies, and identity thieves.

The primary vulnerability from Twitter concerns personal privacy. The default privacy settings on Twitter are inherently weak: any user can choose to follow another user's tweets without their consent. Therefore, it is up to users to manage their own privacy settings. One setting requires that users approve their "followers." Another allows for users to "block" unwelcome followers.

How Twitter Works

Twitter allows users to post "tweets," or short messages of 140 characters, to their personal page on the site. Users can then "follow" tweets to stay updated on the activities of friends. A "follower" will receive a message on their own account when another user posts a tweet.

Users can update their account from a computer, or, more conveniently, from a cell phone or other mobile device. Simply sending a text message to Twitter will update a user's account. Users can also choose to receive updates from other users either online or to their phones (via text message) when their friends post tweets.

Twitter can be imbedded in other social networking services. For example, users can directly link their Facebook "status" to their tweets, further publicizing their whereabouts and thoughts. Many bloggers also add twitter applications to their blogs to provide readers with more timely — and sometimes informal or personal — updates.

Twitter's Privacy Policy states that Twitter "collects personally identifiable information about its users and shares it with third parties." This means that Twitter can sell any information that a user provides, such as names, e-mail addresses, phone numbers, and any other related information. The privacy policy also states "the site is not directed to persons under 13." Parents/sponsors who find a young student is using the service without their approval can contact Twitter by e-mailing privacy@twitter.com to have any personal information deleted. More information on Twitter's Privacy Policy is available online at http://twitter.com/privacy/.

While it can be difficult to adjust to new technological applications, there are benefits for informed users. Administrators with questions are encouraged to contact the Safe Schools Program at safeschools@csc.com for assistance. ▪