

## Maintaining Professional Relationships

Increasingly, the task of educating children and maintaining safe and effective schools is being carried out by teams. In addition to teachers, many schools employ occasional teachers, educational assistants, early childhood educators and a number of other professionals including health professionals, community workers and social workers. This plethora of professionals, each of whom play a vital role in the development and education of students, has given rise to new concerns regarding the professional relationships within school communities.

Professional and respectful relationships are not only a necessary ingredient for effective learning, they are also mandated by governmental, regulatory, and organizational policy.

### Sources that Establish the Obligation to Maintain Respectful and Professional Relationships

The *Ontario Human Rights Code* and *Occupational Health and Safety Act* apply to all employees working within Ontario schools. Both of these statutes prohibit workplace harassment, defined broadly as a course of vexatious comment or conduct that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome. This includes bullying behaviour.

While the *Human Rights Code* prevents harassment that is based on one of the listed prohibited grounds of discrimination, the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* prohibits all forms of harassment and requires school boards to have specific policies setting this out.

For teachers and early childhood educators, both the *Ontario College of Teachers Act* and the *Early Childhood Educators Act* prohibit conduct that is unbecoming a member. Violation of that requirement may result in a finding of professional misconduct and could affect the ability of a teacher or early childhood educator to practice in Ontario. In addition, the Ontario College of Teachers has a code of ethics and standards of practice that apply to the relationship between teachers and others. The College of Early Childhood Educators has recently approved its own code of ethics and standards of practice that contain similar provisions regarding the requirement to treat colleagues and other professionals with respect, trust, and integrity.

ETFO represents teachers, early childhood educators and other education workers in Ontario schools. The following provisions of the ETFO Constitution are directly relevant to the issue of respectful professional relationships, and apply to all ETFO members:

#### Article VI Code of Professional Conduct

6.1 A member shall:

- 6.1.6 strive to eliminate all forms of harassment between individuals in the educational system;
- 6.1.7 endeavour to ensure equity and inclusiveness in the workplace; and
- 6.1.8 strive to achieve and maintain a high degree of professionalism and to uphold the honour, dignity, and ethical standards of the teaching profession.

The *Teaching Profession Act* applies to all teachers and other members of the Ontario Teachers Federation (OTF). The following provision is contained in a regulation established under the *Teaching Profession Act*:

s.18(1) A member shall,

- (a) avoid interfering in an unwarranted manner between other teachers and pupils;
- (b) on making an adverse report on another member, furnish him with a written statement of the report at the earliest possible time and not later than three days after making the report.

In addition to the rules, regulations and policies listed above, each individual school and school board will likely have its own standards that will apply to the professional relationship between co-workers. Such policies will likely be enforceable as a condition of employment and breach of these policies could lead to discipline.

### **What to do if There is a Breakdown in a Professional Relationship**

Consistent with the requirements set out above, ETFO encourages all members to treat one another and colleagues with mutual trust and respect, acknowledging that each has a unique and important role to play in student learning and development.

ETFO members are encouraged to discuss, in a respectful manner, any professional relationship issues that arise between them. If issues can't be resolved, ask your local ETFO representative to help.

Mediation is also available through ETFO provincial office to help resolve colleague-to-colleague disputes. ETFO's Professional Relations Services staff possess relevant expertise in this area and can assist in working out a reasonable and respectful working relationship.

These solutions should be sought early in order to avoid harassment complaints, human rights complaints, grievances, and deteriorating working environments.

**For more information, contact Professional Relations Services staff at 416-962-3836 or 1-888-838-3836 at the provincial office.**

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