

## Professional Boundaries An Important Issue for You...

ETFO's experience in advising and assisting members over the years has caused us to realize that almost any member can fall victim to a lack of understanding of professional boundaries. This can translate into the member making serious mistakes – career threatening ones – in the management of school relationships.

Any act of professional misconduct can lead to disciplinary measures being taken by the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) or the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE). Even an unfounded allegation of professional misconduct could be permanently damaging to a member, to their family, and to the profession.

The term "Professional Boundaries" is not easily defined. When members were interviewed and asked to provide their understanding of such a term, we learned that it means different things to different people.

Some of the overarching common threads to their responses were:

- Violation of the position of trust.
- Abuse of power in a relationship with a child.
- Members using their relationship to meet their own needs instead of the needs of their students.

The most extreme form of boundary violation is that of sexual abuse against a student. Sexual abuse represents the ultimate breach of trust.

### **The Onus is on you!**

What makes the issue of professional boundaries an important and dangerous one for members is the fact that they are responsible for recognizing in themselves whether they are "at risk" of crossing boundaries and if they are, subsequently addressing this issue.

Further, members have a responsibility to address this issue when they witness a colleague who may be crossing boundaries. Administrators and colleagues need to recognize danger signals in others' interactions and intervene. In serious situations, reporting suspicion of child abuse may be required.

### **What places you at the highest risk?**

- Education workers insufficiently trained in their roles can become too personally involved with students. This can lead to actual or alleged sexual misconduct.
- Ignorance of the law is no excuse! teachers, occasional teachers, designated early childhood educators (DECEs), and education support personnel (ESP)/professional

support personnel (PSP) need to be informed about legal liability issues and the standards of the OCT and the CECE.

## Unacceptable Behaviours

In general, activities which take a member beyond the expectations of the employer could easily qualify as boundary violations. These include:

- Becoming too personally involved with students – friend, confidant, surrogate parent.
- Seeing students in private or non-school settings.
- Writing or exchanging notes, letters, or emails.
- Serving as a confidant with regard to a student's decision about his/her personal issues.
- Giving gifts or money to students.
- Inviting students to one's home or cottage.
- Having students stay overnight in one's home/cottage.
- Driving individual students to or from school.
- Giving one student undue attention.
- Being alone with a student with the exception of an emergency situation.
- Sharing your personal problems with students.
- Sharing personal information about a student with a third party.
- Initiating physical contact.

## Protective Strategies

The best way for ETFO members to protect themselves is to follow that old adage “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Teachers, occasional teachers, DECEs, and ESP/PSPs must be ever vigilant of situations that place them in vulnerable positions.

Ask whether you protect yourself by:

- Learning about the law and your liability?
- Teaching with your classroom door open?
- Having another adult present when attending to the personal needs of special needs students?
- Complimenting or commending students without “hugging or touching” them?
- Reporting any reasonable suspicion of child abuse to proper authorities?
- Clarifying procedures with your principal regarding potentially threatening situations such as disciplinary measures, handling of emergency situations, etc.
- Getting parents' and principals' approval regarding all activities off school property?
- Letting students know when they are overstepping your personal boundaries?
- Seeking input from colleagues or other professionals if unsure of the appropriateness of your actions or plans?

Remember... a caring professional relationship always helps a student to learn. But this relationship has boundaries of time, place, purpose, and activity.

If you have any questions or concerns about your professional boundaries, please contact your local president or call and speak with Professional Relations Services staff at 1-888-838-3836 or 416-962-3836.

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