

Professionalism - Advice to Members

Educators have long been regarded as leaders and role models in the community. School boards, the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) and the College of Early Childhood Educators share these expectations. Failure to maintain professional standards can result in allegations of professional misconduct being made to the College and can lead to possible discipline in employment.

The big question is: what does “professionalism” mean? This will depend on individual circumstances. As a basic principle however, it means knowing your role, the expectations required of you by your school board, and your governing college, and acting accordingly.

Whether you are a new professional coming to terms with this new role or whether you are an experienced professional, we recommend regular reflection on this question in the course of your career.

Professionalism in the Classroom

Interaction with students must, at all times, be professional. Interactions should be friendly, but avoid behaving like a “friend.” You are a role model, not a friend or peer of your student.

- (i) *Physical Contact* - Physical contact with a student, even contact intended to comfort an upset student, should be avoided. Any kind of physical contact can potentially raise boundary issues and result in allegations of professional misconduct. Approach verbal interaction with students in a positive and constructive way. Keep the classroom door open for all discussions with students and take steps to avoid being alone with a student.
- (ii) *Preferential Positive or Negative Treatment of a Student* - All students have the right to be treated fairly and without favouritism. Use encouragement. Be fair, be inclusive, be positive and balanced in your feedback. Avoid singling students out either positively or negatively in ways which may be seen to separate them from their peers. Extend opportunities broadly, create a climate of inclusion. Gifts, school or class special privileges, or extra time (e.g., at recess or at lunch) given to one or a few students only should be avoided and may be interpreted as favouritism and/or grooming behaviour.
- (iii) *Use of Vehicle* - Do not give students rides home or offer to take individual students on field or sports trips. Such conduct can be seen as displaying favouritism and moving beyond the professional bounds of your relationship with the student. Such behaviour, regardless of a member’s intention, could be interpreted as grooming the student for an inappropriate sexual relationship.

- (iv) *Use of Personal Items/Discussion of Personal Information* - Students may ask to borrow or use a member's phone, iPad, camera, memory stick, laptop, iPod, or other electronic devices. Members should not share their personal electronic devices for any reason with a student. Students may use the item inappropriately without your knowledge (i.e., access private information or photos, download or save inappropriate images, take inappropriate photos, or review personal content). This could be seen as favouritism and/or grooming behaviour.
- (v) *Personal Conversations* - It is best to refrain from engaging in personal conversations with students about the students or members' own personal information relating to family, health, relationships, or other personal topics. If a student raises a personal matter, members should be aware of the resources available to assist the student, and should direct the student towards them in order to support the student. The *Child and Family Services Act* also imposes a duty to report any abuse, suspected abuse, or neglect of a student. If this is disclosed to you, act on it immediately.

At no time should members discuss their own or the student's dating experiences or sexual experiences even in a joking fashion. Such conversations are inappropriate, and will also be viewed as grooming behavior.

Professionalism within the School and Broader Community

It is best to maintain a professional tone in all communication with school administration, colleagues, students, parents, and school visitors while at work, or off duty. This also holds true with respect to any communication made through a third-party, for example the media, through a survey or petition or on a social media platform. It also applies in social as opposed to strictly classroom or school settings.

Finally, communication between members should also be professional. Spreading gossip about, or criticizing other members, the administration, students, parents, or others should be avoided, as should any conduct which could be seen to create a negative school climate.

Professionalism and Off-Duty Conduct

Members' obligations to conduct themselves professionally may on occasion extend beyond the classroom. Conduct which is unprofessional can be the subject of College and/or school board investigations even if the conduct has occurred during non-teaching hours. For instance, posting videos about behaviour at private parties on the weekend may cause problems.

Professionalism and Social Media

Social media presents special challenges for members. Communication is abbreviated, less formal and immediate. These qualities are useful, but can also present risk for unprofessional conduct. Inappropriate use of social media and other forms of electronic communication can and has resulted in discipline both at the College and by school boards. Members should review any applicable school board policies on the use of social media and electronic communication as well as the OCT's *Professional Advisory – [Maintaining Professionalism: Use of Electronic Communication and Social Media](#)*, which is available online. ETFO also has publications on the ETFO website that provide important advice to members on these issues.

Members should not have students as Facebook friends or have any other type of social networking contact with students. Members should not be posting pictures of students on their Facebook (or other social networking sites) pages and should be careful not to have any material on their personal pages which would be inappropriate for students to see.

Similarly, members should not post critiques of their employers or messages that will reflect badly on their employer in the community. To do so will be seen as inconsistent with your duties to your employer and will attract discipline.

Members who decide to maintain an online social networking presence should take steps to ensure that their privacy settings are set to their most restrictive levels and should review those settings periodically to ensure that they are maintained. Members should ask their friends not to “tag” them in photos. Take care to ensure that inappropriate material is not sent to your accounts.

Members must exercise great caution in having parents of students as Facebook friends. Communication with parents of students needs to maintain a level of professionalism that is not normally found on social media websites. Allowing parents access to a member’s online social media may permit viewing of this material. Inappropriate pictures of other adults, tasteless jokes or other such material may offend the community and may be seen as unprofessional.

Twitter represents an even greater risk to members. Unlike most social media websites, where the user maintains a certain amount of control over what other people can access, Twitter is accessible by almost everyone. Postings can be retweeted, out of the user’s control.

However, should a member decide to maintain a Twitter account, and to actively tweet, they should maintain the same level of professionalism expected in their regular communications as an educator and role model. Failure to do so could result in discipline at both the College and school board level.

In conclusion, members are repeatedly required to exercise their judgement to determine if a course of behaviour is appropriate. It is important for members to know that as professionals responsible for students, they are held to a higher standard. Your conduct should reflect such a standard.

Professional Relations Services has many publications on each topic covered in this Bulletin. Please consult our full list of [Bulletins](#) posted on the website.

For further information, contact your local ETFO president or Professional Relations staff at 416-962-3836 or 1-888-838-3836

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