

# Perspectives

Insights From Colleagues of UE

## Guideposts for Teachers to Maintain Healthy Relationships with Students

*By David Wolowitz*

All schools have rules prohibiting various categories of misconduct by adults to protect students. For example, sexual conduct between an adult employee of a school and a student is universally prohibited. While rules-based training is necessary and important, it has practical limitations. It is impossible for rules to cover every situation in which a teacher interacts with a student because so much depends on context. For example, whether hugging a student is appropriate depends on many variables. Consequently, practical guideposts for preventing misconduct are often more helpful to teachers than strict rules.

Most misconduct cases involve individuals who had no history of prior serious misconduct. They often start with a teacher who interacts with a student appropriately and with good intentions. Over time, the teacher engages in small, self-serving acts which incrementally take the teacher down a “slippery slope” toward serious misconduct. If the behavior continues, the teacher eventually reaches a “point of no return” where irresistible forces take over. At that stage, rationalization sets in. The teacher justifies self-serving actions despite existing rules and takes the final steps to serious misconduct at the “bottom” of the slope. The misconduct may be sexual in nature, but other types of serious misconduct follow the same pattern, including acts of serious financial and religious misconduct.

Teachers must connect with students while ensuring that the relationship does not harm the student. They should assess their behavior and choices by looking at the potential consequences on the student’s intellectual, social, and emotional development. Sometimes the safe choice may not always be clear, but if teachers use the following guideposts in their assessment, they can avoid misconduct and maintain healthy relationships with students.

### *About the Author*

David Wolowitz is senior director and co-chair of the education law group at the McLane Law Firm in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. A substantial part of David’s practice is devoted to training school administrators, faculty, and staff on safe practices to protect students in their care, how to recognize and address signs of inappropriate behavior, and how to respond to allegations of misconduct. He received his undergraduate degree from Washington University, master’s degree from Harvard University, and law degree from the University of Michigan.

### Roles

Teachers often function in multiple roles with students, such as classroom instructor, coach, or advisor. Teachers should avoid behavior in one role that undermines another. For example, using off-color language with students in a coaching role will undermine the teacher's role in the classroom when trying to discipline students for using similar language.

Teachers should stay in professional roles and avoid personal roles which send mixed or ambiguous signals to students. Blurring professional and personal roles causes confusion with students and contributes to the breakdown of boundaries. It is appropriate for teachers to be friendly with students, but not to act as their friend or peer. Teachers should also avoid taking on a parental role. Teachers should act as a role model, always making the student's interests primary and never meeting the teacher's needs through the student.

#### *Safe ground:*

- Maintaining professional roles with students
- Acting as a role model at all times

#### *Risky territory:*

- Acting in peer or parental roles
- Dependency that meets the teacher's needs

### Boundaries

Boundaries are the physical and emotional limits individuals set in their interactions and relationships with others. Boundary awareness is a key element in promoting healthy relationships with students and avoiding misconduct. Boundary violations occur when a person in a position of responsibility crosses a boundary with someone who is vulnerable to meet his or her own needs. Boundary violations are self-serving and exploitative.

Teachers promote boundary awareness, in themselves and students, by establishing clear limits at the beginning of relationships with students and maintaining them consistently. Teachers should expect and be prepared for students to test boundaries. When they do, teachers can use the situation as an opportunity to educate students about the reasons for boundaries and reinforce them. It is always the role of the teacher to set and maintain boundaries, regardless of the behavior of the student. Being alert to healthy boundaries does not mean being aloof. Setting and respecting healthy boundaries should not interfere with forming close, supportive relationships with students.

When interacting with students, teachers should be alert for their own boundary violations. Minor violations are unavoidable. When they occur, teachers should examine their behavior so that similar conduct can be avoided going forward. Make sure your actions promote the interests of the student and not your own needs. Keep in mind that good intentions can still create a harmful impact.

Teachers with boundary awareness will learn to identify and avoid risky situations and conduct. For example, teachers need to be especially careful to avoid conduct with a student that could be mistaken for romantic or

sexual in nature. Teachers should be alert for behavior that may send signals of intimacy such as shared secrets or excessive self-disclosure. If a teacher is concerned that a student may have misinterpreted an action or statement as having a romantic or inappropriate overtone, the teacher should immediately seek guidance on how to handle it.

#### **Safe ground:**

- Establishing and reinforcing clear boundary guidelines
- Boundary crossings which are in the service of the student's interests

#### **Risky territory:**

- Blurring the boundaries between professional and personal roles
- Repeated or serious boundary violations

## **Power**

Teachers are in a position of perceived and actual power over students and should always be alert to this inherent power imbalance. Students often idealize their teachers. They may put them on pedestals. They may even develop a crush. It is normal for a teacher to enjoy the admiration of students. However, it is the responsibility of teachers to assist students with developing into autonomous individuals.

Sadly, serious cases of misconduct occur when a teacher does not respect the dynamics of the power imbalance. What is often seen in cases of serious misconduct is a charismatic teacher who attracts vulnerable students as followers. Rather than encouraging the healthy development of autonomy in these students, this type of teacher creates an unhealthy dependency which produces a "pied piper" effect. Some of the students willingly follow the teacher wherever he or she leads. Such a relationship produces an unhealthy power dependency that meets the teacher's needs but impedes the student's development. It may be difficult for colleagues and administrators to deal with this type of teacher because they are often popular not just with students, but also with parents and alumni.

#### **Safe ground:**

- Encouraging autonomy and independence in students
- Making the student's interests primary

#### **Risky territory:**

- Actions contributing to unhealthy attachment, dependency, or disengagement
- Using power, authority, or position to meet the adult's needs

## **Accountability**

Teachers have many opportunities to be alone with students during and after school hours. Misconduct often occurs when a student and teacher are spending significant time physically alone or communicating privately. Being alone with students is often unavoidable. When this occurs, teachers should avoid even the appearance of impropriety. For example, whenever possible, leave the door to the room open and avoid repeated unscheduled meetings alone with students. Frequent private meetings with students who are perceived as favorites can cause resentment among other students and raise suspicions with other adults.

Teachers need to be especially careful to stay in a professional role and maintain boundaries when using technology to communicate privately with students. It is easy to be more informal when texting or using social media. Teachers should, however, avoid any language which could be ambiguous or misunderstood by the student or others. Keep your electronic communications with students focused on matters about school work.

When a teacher's conduct has gone past the point of no return, it usually involves secrecy. The student will keep secrets to avoid losing his or her special relationship with the teacher. Teachers should never ask students to keep secrets in order to maintain the relationship. All interactions with students should be transparent as if they are subject to review.

### ***Safe ground:***

- Acting transparently
- Supporting the student's developmental growth and social integration

### ***Risky territory:***

- Opaque or secret conduct
- Conduct which may lead to the student's regression and social isolation.

## **Using the Four Guideposts to Assess Behavior and the Teacher-Student Relationship**

When teachers are alert to roles, boundaries, power, and accountability in their relationships with students, self-correction is possible before serious transgressions occur. In addition, the guideposts assist teachers with identifying early warning signs in their colleagues and early intervention.

### ***Be open to consulting with colleagues and encourage feedback.***

A healthy school culture should encourage open, non-judgmental discussions among colleagues about boundaries and interactions with students. Teachers should not be afraid or reluctant to consult with others about difficult or confusing situations. When in doubt, ask for advice. For example, if a student appears to have a crush on you, do not be reluctant to ask a colleague or supervisor how to deal with it. Experienced teachers have seen or experienced most problems and can offer valuable advice. The goal is to identify potentially problematic behaviors early and to change them before they evolve into something more serious or harmful.

Another good practice is to encourage colleagues to give feedback if they have concerns about your behavior with students. It is often difficult for one colleague to give feedback to another, so it helps to remind colleagues that you are open to hearing from them. When seeking advice from colleagues, invite them to speak up about any concerns they have. Colleagues are more likely to provide important feedback if you repeatedly give them permission and tell them how much you value their input. Also, invite feedback from supervisors and others who see how you interact with students.

### **Raise concerns about the inappropriate conduct of others.**

It is rare that serious misconduct happens in a school environment without some warning signs. To protect the interests of students and the school community, it is crucial that potentially harmful behavior is discussed when it is first observed so that it can be addressed. Neither status nor seniority excuses misbehavior putting student safety at risk. Teachers have a duty to students, their school, and their colleagues to raise and discuss concerns about behavior that may lead to misconduct impacting students. It is a good idea for teachers to consult their school's policies to see if there are specific procedures in place for reporting suspicious behavior to administration or if their state law requires them to report the conduct to government authorities.

It is difficult under any circumstances to raise behavioral concerns with a colleague. It is often even more difficult to raise concerns with a colleague's supervisor. Yet, not acting is also a disservice to the colleague. No one can change and grow without input and feedback. It is much better to deal with problematic behaviors as learning opportunities than as disciplinary matters.

If the troubling behavior seems fairly minor, consider raising it directly with a colleague. You may want to consult with someone whose advice you trust on how to do so. If the conduct continues after speaking with your colleague, consult with your supervisor about how to proceed. Do not let the conduct continue without addressing it.

If you are uncomfortable raising an issue with a colleague or feel it should be brought to the attention of an administrator, do not hesitate to go to someone in a position of responsibility. You may also want to ask a trusted colleague to assist and provide support.

Sometimes teachers assume that their colleague's supervisors already know of the problematic behavior. Never assume that someone else has already raised the concern. When concerns about student safety are involved, it is better to over-report than to under-report.

If you have alerted a supervisor and the troubling conduct continues, alert the supervisor again. If you feel the supervisor does not take the matter seriously or the conduct continues or escalates, go to a higher-level administrator. In a school that puts the interests of student safety first, there should be no adverse consequences for those who raise concerns about an adult's behavior toward students.

Remember, the teacher-student relationship should always help the student grow academically, socially, and emotionally. When teachers consider roles, boundaries, power, and accountability they are better able to set limits and maintain healthy relationships with students.

---

The material appearing in this publication is presented for informational purposes and should not be considered legal advice or used as such.

Copyright © 2013 by United Educators Insurance, a Reciprocal Risk Retention Group. All rights reserved. Contents of this document are for members of United Educators only. Permission to post this document electronically or to reprint must be obtained from United Educators.