

Maintaining Safe and Professional Relationships with Students Guidelines for Practice

Independent Schools' Teachers' Association of New Zealand

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These Guidelines for Practice have been compiled by ISTANZ. The guidelines draw on NZEI, PPTA, ISTANZ and EI material. They are intended for use by ISTANZ members in both the primary and secondary sectors. ISTANZ recognizes and appreciates the time and effort that has been put into the development of this document by the aforementioned parties.

RATIONALE

Where physical contact is concerned, teachers and ancillary staff are in a high risk occupation. These guidelines highlight areas where staff are particularly at risk and also what is considered to be appropriate behaviour within the bounds of common sense and safe practice.

ISTANZ acknowledges that there are instances within teaching that may necessitate a degree of physical contact. For the most part these are confined to the following: medical assistance, ensuring physical safety, toileting, changing clothing (junior primary or special needs), counselling, coaching, some drama-based activities and the like.

It is advised that when faced with these situations the following safeguards should be considered:

- 1) Know your school's "Physical Safety" policy or its equivalent. Ensure parents and community are advised of its main points and protocols when the situation requires it (Learn the policy from the outset of employment).
- 2) Make sure another adult or at least one other student is present whenever possible.
- 3) Communicate to the student what you are doing and why you need to do it;
- 4) Make sure a one to one meeting such as may be required in a counselling situation is held in a relatively open space (windows, open door and frequent passers by.), you may wish to keep a written log of meetings. (Balance the students need for discretion or confidentiality with your own need for protection against false allegation.)
- 5) Drama-based activities and the like that require a closer than usual incursion on personal space should be planned so that safe boundaries are set.

GUIDELINES

Avoiding the following situations will decrease vulnerability to allegations of compromising behaviour by students or other adults.

Staff should be aware of the risks associated with and avoid:

- **Entering rooms where students are changing for sports or cultural events;**
- **Invading a student's personal space (*such as leaning over them closely at a desk*);**
- **Spending a lot of time privately with individual students outside of professional duties;**
- **Being alone in a room with a student unless one can be observed;**

Staff should not:

- **Touch students in any way able to be construed as sexual (*such as massaging or squeezing shoulders or "patting" bottom*);**
- **Gaze in a direction that may be construed as looking at a student in a sexual way;**
- **Comment on any piece of literature or picture or on a comment by a student in a way that twists the subject matter so that it has a sexual meaning;**
- **Refer to a student or group of students in a sexual or sexist way;**
- **Comment on a student's physical development, either to that student or to other persons;**
- **Body search students for missing property;**
- **Turn "a blind eye" to any other staff member harassing students;**
- **Misuse or allow the misuse of information technologies such as email and internet.**
- **Condone or encourage the abuse or illegal use of alcohol or drugs;**
- **Use or allow the use or viewing of pornographic material;**
- **Use or allow the use of material that contains explicit content that instructs or advocates harmful pursuits;**
- **Allow students to use sexual or sexist language to put down another student or group of students;**
- **Allow students to comment on other students' physical development;**
- **Allow students to physically or verbally harass or "bully" other students;**
- **Allow sleeping arrangements (*on camps or overnight stays*) to compromise the safety or well-being of a student.**

Ultimately it is your responsibility to ensure safe and uncompromising practice.

However, as part of the staff development programme every employer needs to ensure all members are aware of their rights and responsibilities in this area. A clear school policy should be developed in consultation with staff and parents to ensure safe and uncompromising practice. The policy may include the ISTANZ Guidelines for Safe Practice but may also add detail as appropriate to the specific educational setting as identified by staff and parents.

As a statement that governs practice, the policy should make clear reference to guidelines that develop actions and strategies that are safe.

The policy should be clearly displayed in a public place and include the following:

- teaching practices which prevent staff from being vulnerable to allegations of indecency or child abuse;
- staff awareness and training in the management and prevention of child abuse;
- visibility in the workplace which protects both staff and children;
- adults should be alone with children only in limited and clearly defined circumstances;

All relieving staff, parent helpers and visitors who are involved with students should be told of or shown the guidelines and the school's policy.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

If a concern arises regarding a possible breach of professional practice it is suggested that the following avenues be pursued.

- 1) Talk confidentially to a trusted colleague or support person about the situation. This may be a member of staff or the ISTANZ Employment Relations Officer. b
- 2) Report the behaviour to appropriate people in the school. Many schools have clear procedures for working through problems of this nature. It is likely the school will have a nominated person to assist with problems. Be aware of the procedures before you communicate specific case details unless it is an emergency. In doing this you will limit unnecessary complications.
- 3) Seek advice from ISTANZ officers.

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