Administrator’s Guide to Professional Boundaries

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Abuse and the Impact on Schools

• While the number of sex offenders in the overall number of educators and staff is low, a single incident can have a devastating impact on a school district.

• At least 7 out of 54 Alaskan school districts have been impacted by child abuse allegations in the past few years.

• The Aided in Agency standard states that an employer may be considered responsible for an employee’s actions if the person’s job placed him or her in a position of authority over others, even if there was no negligence on the employer’s part.

• Insurance limits today may cover these claims, but in later years that coverage may not be available.
Who are the perpetrators?

Teachers 18%
Coaches 15%
Substitute Teachers 13%
Bus Drivers 12%
Aides 11%
Other 10%
Security Guards 10%
Principals 6%
Counselors 5%
Dual Relationships

Definition: Relationships where one person has a professional relationship with another person in which one has the upper hand, while also having a second, significantly different relationship where the two people seem to be peers.

- Ethical rules have been established in the teaching profession recognizing that students could be vulnerable to being taken advantage of
- Students are less likely to be aware of the risks of a dual relationship
- Responsibility for maintaining appropriate boundaries lies with the professional
- Transparency is the antidote to the risk with dual relationships
A Recap of **Professional Boundaries**

- **Grooming:** Actions deliberately undertaken with the aim of befriending and establishing an emotional connection with a child, in order to lower the child’s inhibitions in preparation for sexual activity with the child.

- Not all boundary invasions are inappropriate and not all inappropriate boundary invasions involve sexual grooming but preventing boundary invasions can prevent grooming and thus abuse.

- All actions by an educator must have a bona fide health, safety, or educational reason.

- All members of a school community have a responsibility to children to adhere to professional boundaries and report to administrators when boundaries are being violated.

- Transparency is key.
Guidance Provided to Staff

Guidance we have provided to staff when they have observed a professional boundary violation includes:

• Err on the side of caution. When in doubt, report it out!
• Better to over-report than under-report
• Document
• Escalate if necessary
• Maintain confidentiality
• Follow the rules of mandatory reporting of child abuse and/or sexual abuse to OCS and law enforcement
Goals of this Training

• Help administrators develop an environment in schools in which the importance of adhering to professional boundaries and reporting violations is understood

• Provide guidance for developing a plan to educate employees, students, and community members about professional boundaries and how to report a professional boundary violation

• Help administrators understand how to respond when a report of a professional boundary violation is made

• Prevent situations where an administrator has to say “I didn’t see it coming” after abuse is discovered.
Professional Boundaries in Your District

To have Professional Boundaries recognized and understood by all staff, schools must:

• Adopt Board Policies addressing professional boundaries
• Provide training to all staff
• Share professional boundaries information with families and students
• Respond promptly and effectively to reports of professional boundary violations
Professional Boundaries in Your District

Adopt Professional Boundaries Policies and Administrative Regulations

• AASB Model Board Policy 5141.42 provides general standards for maintaining professional boundaries

• AASB Model Administrative Regulation 5141.42 provides specific examples for boundary invasions, reporting requirements, and follow up requirements for administrators.

• Only amend the policy or administrative regulation with the advice of outside counsel and in consultation with AASB
Professional Boundaries in Your District

Educate staff on policies and best practices

• Develop a training plan
  • All staff should receive training each year
  • When will training be delivered
  • How will training be delivered

• Reinforce policies regularly with additional education and reminders during teacher and staff training throughout the school year

• We will discuss developing a training plan in this presentation
Professional Boundaries in Your District

Share information with students and families

• Let families know your school district has adopted a professional boundaries policy and why

• Let students and families know:
  • What the expectations are for staff to adhere to professional boundaries
  • How a student or family member can make a report
  • How concerns will be heard and investigated
  • How families will be notified of outcomes
Professional Boundaries in Your District

Respond to and address reported boundary violations

• If a boundary violation is observed, administrators need to take immediate steps to address the concern in a timely manner and appropriately. This requires knowledge of:
  • Your organization’s professional boundaries policies
  • How to respond when an employee reports a boundary violation
  • How to document a reported boundary violation
  • How to address the concern with the employee

• We will discuss these steps in this presentation
Develop a Training Plan

Develop a Professional Boundaries Training Plan for Staff

• Frequency
  • It is recommended that professional boundaries training be provided to staff upon hire
  • Annual training will help ensure staff remain aware of organizational policies and any new recommendations
  • Continuing discussion during in service and other staff training

• Identify training resources
  • Live virtual or in person training
  • Online recorded training
  • Qualified staff member to train other staff
Develop a Training Plan

Professional Boundaries training should include:

• The definition of “grooming” and the steps of grooming
• The definition of “boundary invasion” and examples of boundary invasions
• Clear guidance on how to make a report of a suspected boundary invasion
  • Who are reports made to?
  • Is there a form to be completed?
  • How are reports generally handled?
Responding to a Report of a Boundary Violation

Take every report or observation seriously

• It’s easy to dismiss something as an insignificant or to rationalize why it shouldn’t be addressed (It was a little mistake. I don’t think they meant anything by it. I don’t want to embarrass them.)

• As we saw in the *Professional Boundaries for Alaskan School Staff* training, small boundary invasions can be a signal of a larger issue lurking underneath the surface.
Responding to a Report of a Boundary Violation

Do not delay in responding to a report

• The sooner the concern is addressed, the better chance there is of preventing harm to children.

• If an individual makes an initial report at a time when you cannot immediately address it, notify the reporter of a specific date and time that you will contact them in order to get clarification and additional information.

• Act on the report as soon as possible.
Responding to a Report of a Boundary Violation

Provide reassurance to the reporter and ask clarifying questions

• Reassure the reporter that they have acted responsibly in bringing the concern forward.

• Ask clarifying questions
  • When did this occur?
  • Who was present (other witnesses – both adults and children)
  • Is this the first time this behavior has been observed by you?
  • Did you make any comment to the individual in question about your observations?
  • Have you remarked on your observation to anyone else?
  • Is there anyone else I should speak to about this?
  • Is there anything else I should be aware of?
Responding to a Report of a Boundary Violation

Review the school district policy for investigating and addressing boundary violation reports with the reporter

• Remind the reporter of the need for confidentiality and to report if they experience any type of retaliation for making a report
• Inform the reporter what information regarding the investigation and outcome that may be shared with them
• When possible, inform the reporter of anticipated timelines for responding to the concern
Responding to a Report of a Boundary Violation

Document the report as soon as possible

• If the report was made in writing, contact the reporter to ask any clarifying questions.

• If you are the one who observed the boundary violation, document what you observed, asking yourself the same clarifying questions.

• Record the details provided. Be sure to include:
  • Who made the report
  • The date the report was received
Responding to a Report of a Boundary Violation

Documenting the report

- Information should be documented objectively based on what was observed and directly reported

- Documentation should be done at the same time as the report is made or as soon as possible after the report is made to avoid important details being forgotten

- Have the reporter review the notes you have made for accuracy
Responding to a Report of a Boundary Violation

Previous reports of boundary violations or similar concerns

- Review the personnel file of the individual about whom the report was made as well as Title IX records for any previous boundary violation reports involving the individual
  - When were any previous reports made
  - How were they addressed
  - Is this the same or a similar issue
Responding to a Report of a Boundary Violation

Notify other administrators of the report, according to your policy

• Review your organizational policy regarding reporting boundary violations

• The severity of the boundary violation and whether or not there were any prior incidents may guide the next steps.
  • If it is a first-time violation and it is minor, it may be that the concern will be addressed by the administrator and documented.
  • A more serious violation or record of previous boundary violations may warrant an escalated response.
Responding to a Report of a Boundary Violation

Develop a plan for an investigation

• Refer to your organizational policy as it’s possible that an investigation may be coordinated among several people (administrator, superintendent, legal counsel, etc).

• Documentation of the investigation will include:
  • Who
  • What
  • When
  • Where
  • Why – ONLY the employee’s explanation!
Responding to a Report of a Boundary Violation

Addressing the boundary violation with the employee

• Provide the employee with due process
  • Loudermill Hearing
  • Weingarten Rights
• Determine the appropriate action to be taken
• Document the action being taken and provide a copy to the employee
Responding to a Report of a Boundary Violation

Others that may need to be informed

• OCS and Law Enforcement per mandated reporting guidelines
• Professional Teaching Practices Commission

• If the discipline results in termination but not legal action, the school district needs to consider how they will respond if they are contacted by a potential future employer for a reference.
Other Best Practices

• Complete background checks
• Complete all reference checks and pay attention to red flags
• Social media
• National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC) Educator Identification Clearinghouse: https://www.nasdtec.net/page/ASSOC_CH_REG
In Summary

• Policies need be adopted
• Staff need to be trained
• Information about professional boundaries needs to be provided to students and families
• Appropriate follow-up must happen
Resources

• Alaska Public Entity Insurance Training: https://akpei.com/professional-boundaries-for-educators/

• Stop Educator Sexual Abuse, Misconduct, and Exploitation (SESAME): https://www.sesamenet.org/training

• Alaska Professional Teaching Practices Commission: https://education.alaska.gov/ptpc