



# Administrator's Guide to Professional Boundaries

**Carleen Mitchell, Deputy Director  
Alaska Public Entity Insurance**



# 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](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>