

What are "professional boundaries" and why are we even talking about them?

By Marie Sainz-Funaro, President OFT

The term "professional boundaries" is not easy to define. So what are they and why are we discussing them? Maybe the best way to define what they are is to say that they are the current acceptable "norms" of behavior in relationships at the workplace. I say current because over the history of education those norms have changed. It is no longer the norm to pick up a ruler or paddle and whack our students' bottoms as was perfectly acceptable many, many years ago. It is no longer the norm to pick on a student to humiliate or intimidate in front of other students, usually "at the blackboard" when trying to solve a problem. It is no longer the norm to have students write 100 times that they will behave in class. Those actions are clearly understood to be beyond our professional boundaries, but not all actions are so easily categorized. Some of our current boundaries are fluid and hard to grasp, but we can probably all agree on some common boundaries. Not behaving within the professional boundaries can lead to serious problems of professional misconduct and discipline. When in doubt the question to be asked is whether or not the situation is ripe for misunderstanding. If so, stop! As professionals we must maintain an atmosphere which is comfortable and conducive to learning, not just in the classroom, but wherever professional relationships take us. It could be at a sports event, or at a school social gathering, or on a field trip or even a visit to a student's home. Teaching, a noble profession, will bring teachers into close contact with children and young people. Effective teaching within our professional boundaries is based on warm, mutually respectful relationships between teachers and students.

Over the last few years several of our colleagues have found themselves accused of wrongful behavior, behavior that could be described as outside the "professional boundaries". Right or wrong, founded or unfounded, the mere accusation was devastating to each teacher. We can all be friendly and respectful without violating those boundaries. So what are some behaviors that might be considered beyond professional boundaries? Clearly physical and sexual abuse are the most extreme forms of boundary violation. The literature lists several less extreme, but equally important forms of violations, including becoming too personally involved with students, seeing students in private or non-school settings, writing or exchanging notes, letters or emails and texting which is a whole new area to be carefully examined, inviting students to one's home, driving individual students to and from school, making suggestive or offensive remarks, using information gained in the course of our teaching in unprofessional ways, downloading or using inappropriate information on computers.

Laws, rules and regulations are in place to ensure that the rights of educators are protected. It is the right thing to do and it is the democratic thing to do; however, it is far better not to have to defend one's actions simply because they were misinterpreted. Alerting our colleagues when we see behaviors that could be misinterpreted or beyond the professional boundaries is also the right thing to do. I call on you to understand professional boundaries, to protect our profession by behaving within professional boundaries, and ensure our colleagues do, too, with the same vigor with which you protect and care for your students.